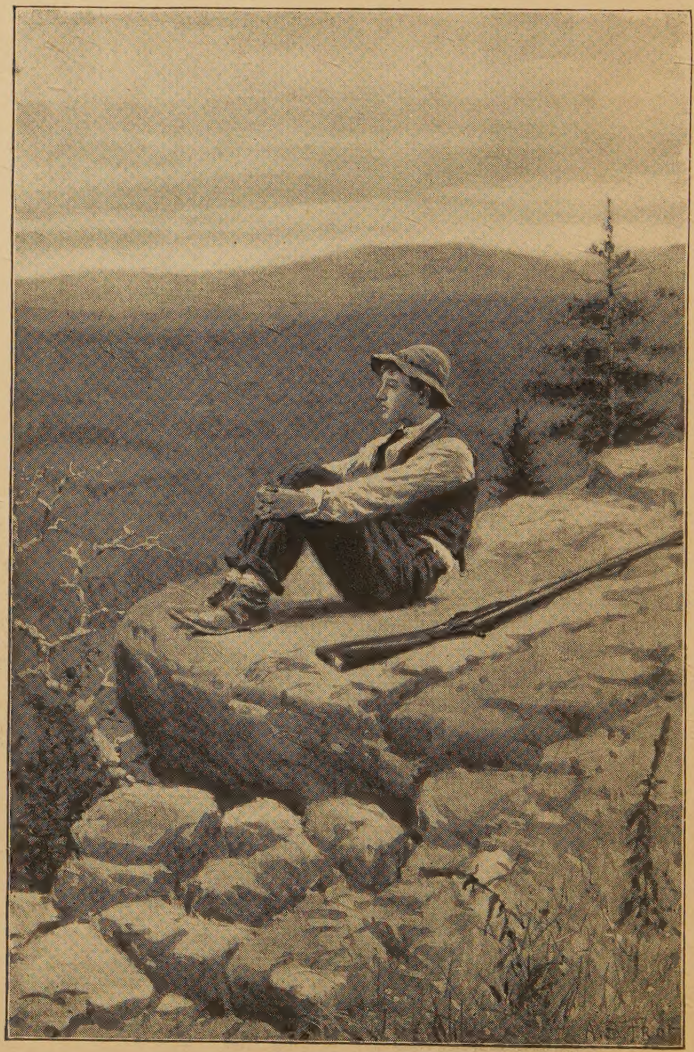
THE SOLDIER OF THE VALLEY

By

NELSON LLOYD

HENRY B. DOUGLAS
4 Ridge Crest Road
Saddle River, N. J. 07458



THEY CALLED TO ME AS A BOY.

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NELSON LLOYD

ILLUSTRATED BY

A. B. FROST

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THE SOLDIER OF THE VALLEY

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I

I WAS a soldier. I was a hero. You notice my tenses are past. I am a simple school-teacher now, a prisoner in Black Log. There are no bars to my keep, only the wall of mountains that make the valley; and look at them on a clear day, when sunshine and shadow play over their green slopes, when the clouds all white and gold swing lazily in the blue above them, and they speak of freedom and of life immeasurable. There are no chains to my prison, no steel cuffs to gall the limbs, no guards to threaten and cow me. Yet here I stay year after year. Here I was born and here I shall die.

I am a traveller. In my mind I have gone the world over, and those wanderings have been unhampered by the limitations of mere time, for I know my India of the First Century as well

as that of the Twentieth, and the China of Confucius is as real to me as that of Kwang Su. Without stirring from my little porch down here in the valley I have pierced the African jungles and surveyed the Arctic ice-floes. Often the mountains call me to come again, to climb them, to see the real world beyond, to live in it, to be of it, but I am a prisoner. They called to me as a boy, when wandering over the hills, I looked away to them, and over them, into the mysterious blue, picturing my India and my China, my England and my Russia in a geographical jumble that began just beyond the horizon.

Then I was a prisoner in the dungeons of Youth and my mother was my jailer. The day came when I was free, and forth I went full of hope, twenty-three years old by the family Bible, with a strong, agile body and a homely face. I went as a soldier. For months I saw what is called the world; I had glimpses of cities; I slept beneath the palms; I crossed a sea and touched the tropics. Marching beneath a blazing sun, huddling from the storm in the scant shelter of the tent, my spirits were always keyed

to the highest by the thought that I was seeing life and that these adventures were but a foretaste of those to come. But one day when we marched beneath the blazing sun, we met a storm and found no shelter. We charged through a hail of steel. They took me to the sea on a stretcher, and by and by they shipped me home. Then it was that I was a hero—when I came again to Black Log—what was left of me.

My people were very kind. They sent Henry Holmes's double phaeton to the county town to meet my train, and as I stumbled from the car, being new to my crutches, I fell into the arms of a reception committee. Tim was there. And my little brother fought the others off and picked me up and carried me, as I had carried him in the old days when he was a toddling youngster and I a sturdy boy. But he was six feet two now and I had wasted to a shadow. Perry Thomas had a speech prepared. He is our orator, our prize debater, our township statesman, and his frock-coat tightly buttoned across his chest, his unusually high and stiffly starched collar, his repeated coughing as he

hovered on the outskirts of the crowd, told me plainly that he had an address to make. Henry Holmes, indeed, asked me to stand still just one minute, and I divined instantly that he was working in the interest of oratory; but Tim spoiled it all by running off with me and tossing me into the phaeton.

So in the state-coach of Black Log, drawn by Isaac Bolum's lemon-colored mules, with the committee rattling along behind in a spring wagon, politely taking our dust, I came home once more, over the mountains, into the valley.

Sometimes I wonder if I shall ever make another journey as long as that one. Sometimes I have ventured as far as the gap, and peeped into the broad open country, and caught the rumble of the trains down by the river. There is one of the world's highways, but the toll is great, and a crippled soldier with a scanty pension and a pittance from his school is wiser to keep to the ways he knows.

And how I know the ways of the valley! That day when we rode into it every tree seemed to be waving its green arms in salute. As we

swung through the gap, around the bend at the saw-mill and into the open country, checkered brown and yellow by fields new-ploughed and fields of stubble, a flock of killdeer arose on the air and screamed a welcome. In their greeting there seemed a taunting note as though they knew they had no more to fear from me and could be generous. I saw every crook in the fence, every rut in the road, every bush and tree long before we came to it. But six months had I been away, yet in that time I had lived half my life, and now I was so changed that it seemed strange to find the valley as fat and full as ever, stretched out there in the sunshine in a quiet, smiling slumber.

"Things are just the same, Mark, you'll notice," said Tim, pointing to a hole in the flooring of the bridge over which we were passing.

The valley had been driving around that same danger spot these ten years. There was a world of meaning to the returning wanderer in that broken plank, and it was not hard to catch the glance of my brother's eye and to know his mind.

Henry Holmes on the front seat, driving, caught the inflection of Tim's voice and cried testily: "You are allus runnin' the walley down. Why don't you tell him about the improvements instead of pintin' out the bad spots in the road?"

"Improvements?" said I, in a tone of inquiry.

"Theop Jones has bought him a new side-bar buggy," replied the old man. "Then the Kallabergers has moved in from the country and is fixin' up the Harmon house at the end of the town."

"And a be-yutiful place they're makin' of it," cried Isaac Bolum; "be-yutiful!"

"They've added a fancy porch," Henry explained, "and are gittin' blue glass panes for the front door."

"We've three spring-beds in town now," put in Isaac in his slow, dreamy way. "If I mind right the Spikers bought theirs before war was declared, so you've seen that one. Well, Piney Martin he has got him one—let me see—when did he git it, Henery?"

Old Homes furrowed his brow and closed one

eye, seeking with the other the inspiration of the sky.

"July sixth," he answered. "Don't you mind, Ike, it come the same day and on the wery same stage as the news of the sinkin' of the Spaynish fleet?"

"Nonsense," retorted Isaac. "You're allus mixin' dates, Henery. You're thinkin' of Tip Pulsifer's last baby. He come July six, for don't you mind how they called him Cevery out of pity and generosity for the Spayniards? Piney's spring-bed arrived the same day and on the same stage as brung us the news of Mark here havin' his left leg shot off."

"Mebbe—mebbe—mebbe," muttered Henry, shaking his head dubiously. "It certainly do beat all how things happens all at once in this world. Come to think of it, the wery next day six of my sheep was killed by dogs."

"It's good you're gittin' your dates cleared," snapped old Bolum. "On history, Henery Holmes, you are the worst."

Henry retorted with an angry protest against the indictment, declaring that he was studying

history when Bolum was being nourished on "soft food." That was true. Isaac admitted it frankly. He wasn't his mother's keeper, that he could regulate his own birthday. Had that been in his power he would certainly have set it a half century earlier or later to avoid being constantly annoyed by the "onreasonablest argeyments" Six Stars had ever heard. This made old Holmes smile softly, and he turned and winked at me. The one thing he had ever been thankful for, he said, was that his life had fallen with that of Isaac Bolum. Whenever he done wrong; whenever the consciousness of sin was upon him and he needed the chastisin' rod, he just went to the store and set and listened to Ike. To this Isaac retorted that it was a wonder the rod had not worn out long ago; it was pleasing to know, at least, that he was made of tough old hickory. Henry admitted this to be a "good 'un" on him—an unusual one, considering the source—but that did not settle the exact date of the arrival of Piney Martin's spring-bed.

It was time for me to protest that it mattered little whether the event occurred on July sixth

or a week later, since what really interested me was the question as to who was the owner of the third of these luxuries. Isaac's serious, self-conscious look answered me, but I pressed the inquiry to give him an opportunity to sing the praises of this newest of his household gods. Mr. Bolum's pleasure was evident. Once launched into an account of the comfort of springs as compared to a straw-tick on ropes, he would have monopolized our attention to the end of the journey, but the sagacious Henry blocked him rudely by a tug at the reins which almost threw the lemon-colored mules on their haunches.

We were at the foot of the slope where the road to Buzzards Glory branches from the pike. The Arkers had spied us coming, and ran down from the tannery to greet us. Arnold, after he had a dozen times expressed his delight at my return, asked if I had seen any shooting. His son Sam's wife nudged him and whispered in his ear, upon which he apologized abruptly, explaining that he had dropped his spectacles in the tanning vat. Sam sought to extricate his

father from these imaginary difficulties by demanding that I go coon-hunting with him on the next night. This set Sam's wife's elbow going again very vigorously, and the further embarrassment of the whole family was saved by Henry Holmes swinging the whip across the backs of the mules.

On went the state-coach of Black Log. We clattered quickly over the last level stretch. We dragged up the last long hill, and from its brow I looked on the roofs of Six Stars rising here and there from the green bed of trees. I heard the sonorous rumble of the mill, and above it a shrill and solitary crow. On the state-coach went, down the steep, driving the mules madly before it. Their hoofs made music on the bridge, and my journey was ended.

Home again! Even Tip Pulsifer was dear to me then. He was between the wheels when we stopped, and I planted a crutch on one of his bare feet and embraced him.

He grinned and cried, "Mighty souls!"

That embrace, that grin and that heart-born exclamation marked the entrance of the Pulsifer

family into my life. Theretofore I had regarded them with a suspicion born of a pile of feathers at the door of their shanty on the ridge, for they kept no chickens. Now the six little Pulsifers, all with the lower halves of their faces washed and their hair soaped down, were climbing around me, and the latest comer, that same Cevery who arrived with Piney Martin's springbed, was hoisted into kissing distance by his mother, who was thinner and more wan than ever, but still smiling. But this was home and these were home people. My heart was open then and warm, and I took the seven little Pulsifers to it. I took old Mrs. Bolum to it, too, for she tumbled the clamoring infants aside and in her joy forgot the ruffles in the sleeves of her wonderful purple silk. At her elbow hovered the tall, spare figure of Aaron Kallaberger. Mindful of the military nature of the occasion he appeared in his old army overcoat, in spite of the heat. Rare honor, this! And better still, he hailed me as "Comrade," and enfolding my hand in his long horny fingers, cried "All's well, Mark!"

The mill ceased its rumbling. Already the valley was rocking itself to sleep. Out of the darkening sky rang the twanging call of a nighthawk, and the cluck of a dozing hen sounded from the foliage overhead. A flock of weary sheep pattered along the road, barnward bound, heavy eyed and bleating softly. The blue gate was opened wide. My hand was on Tim's shoulder and Tim's arm was my support.

"All's well!" I cried. For I was hobbling home.

II

PERRY THOMAS still had his speech to deliver. He hovered around the rocking-chair in which they had enthroned me, and with one hand he kept clutching violently at his throat as though he were suppressing his eloquence by muscular effort. His repeated coughing seemed a constant warning that at any moment he might be vanquished in the struggle for becoming silence. There was a longing light in his eyes and a look of appeal whenever our glances met. My position was embarrassing. He knew that I realized his predicament, but how could I interrupt the kindly demonstrations of the old friends who pressed about me, to announce that the local orator had a formal address of welcome that was as yet unspoken? And an opportunity like this might never again occur in Perry's life! Here were gathered not only the people of the village, but of the valley. His words would fall not alone on the ears

of a few choice spirits of the store forum, or the scoffing pedants of the literary society, for crowded into that little room were old men whose years would give weight to the declaration that it was the greatest talking they had ever heard; were young children, who in after years, when a neglected gravestone was toppling over all that was left of the orator, would still speak of the wonders of his eloquence; were comely women to whom the household was the world and the household task the life's work, but who could now for the moment lift their bent forms and have their dulled eyes turned to higher and better things. Moreover, there were in that room a score of deep eyes that could not but quicken at the sight of a slender, manly figure, clad in scholastic black, of a thin, earnest face, with beetled brows and a classic forehead from which swept waves of black hair. Little wonder Perry was restless under restraint! Little wonder he grew more melancholy and coughed louder and louder, as the light without faded away, and the faces within were dimmed in the shadow!

From the kitchen came the clatter of dishes and pans and a babel of women's voices, the shrill commands of old Mrs. Bolum rising above them. The feast was preparing. Its hour was at hand. Apollo never was a match for Bacchus, and Perry Thomas could not command attention once Mrs. Bolum appeared on the scene. He realized this. Her cries came as an inspiration to action. In the twilight I lost him, but the lamp-light disclosed him standing over Henry Holmes, who had been driven into a corner and was held prisoner there by a threatening finger. There was a whispered parley that ended only when the old man surrendered and, stepping to the centre of the room, rapped long and loud on the floor with his cane.

Henry is always blunt. He has a way of getting right at the heart of things with everyone except Bolum. For Isaac, he regards circumlocution as necessary, taking the ground that with him the quantity and not the quality of the words counts. So when he had silenced the company, and with a sweep of his cane had driven them into close order about the walls, he said:

"Mr. Thomas is anxious to make an address."

At this moment Mr. Thomas was about to step into the zone of fire of a hundred eyes. There was a very audible titter in the corner where three thoughtless young girls had squeezed themselves into one rocking-chair. The orator heard it and brought his heels together with a click.

"Mind what I told you, Henery," he whispered very loud, glaring at Mr. Holmes.

"Oh, yes," Henry returned in a casual tone.

He thumped the floor again, and when the tittering had subsided, and only the snuffling of Cevery Pulsifer broke the silence, he said: "In jestice to Mr. Thomas, I am requested to explain that the address was originally intended to be got off at the railroad. It was forgot by accident, and him not havin' time to change it, he asks us to make believe we are standin' alongside of the track at Pleasantville just as the train comes in."

Isaac Bolum had fixed himself comfortably on two legs of his chair, with the projecting soles of his boots caught behind the rung. Feet and

chair-legs came to the floor with a crash, and half rising from the seat, one hand extended in appeal, the other at his right ear, forming a trumpet, he shouted: "Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!"

"This ain't a liter'ry meetin', Mr. Bolum. The floor is Mr. Thomas's, I believe," said Henry with dignity.

"But I didn't catch the name of the station you said we was to imagine."

"I said Pleasantville," cried Henry angrily.

"I apologize," returned Isaac. "I thought you said Meadowville, and never havin' been there, I didn't see how I could imagine the station."

"It seems to me, Isaac Bolum," retorted Henry with dignified asperity, "that with your imagination you could conjure up a whole railroad system, includin' the freight-yard. But Mr. Thomas has the floor."

"See here, Henery Holmes," cried Isaac, "it's all right for us old folks, but there's the children. How can they imagine Pleasantville station when some of 'em ain't yet seen a train?"

This routed even Henry Holmes. At the

store he would never have given in, but he was not accustomed to hearing so loud a murmur of approval greet the opposition. He realized that he had been placed in a false position by the importunities of Mr. Thomas, and to him he now left the brunt of the trouble by stepping out of the illumined circle and losing himself in the company.

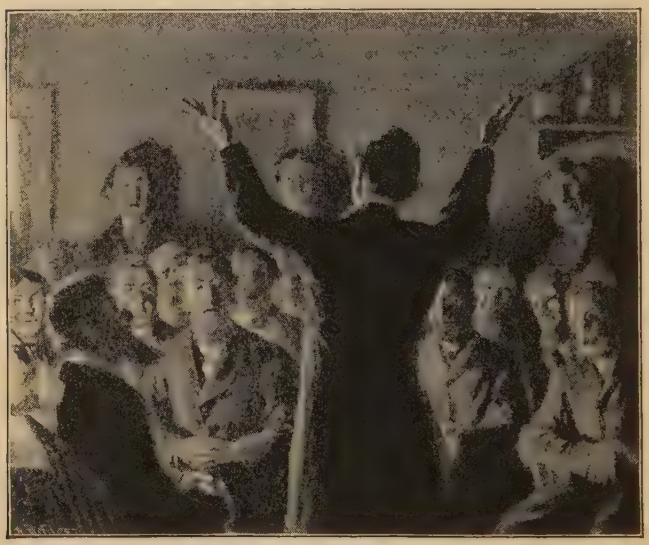
The fire-swept zone had no terrors for Perry. With one hand thrust between the first and second buttons of his coat, and the other raised in that gesture with which the orator stills the sea of discontent, he stepped forward, and turning slowly about, brought his eyes to bear on the contumacious Bolum. He indicated the target. Every optic gun in the room was levelled at it. The upraised hand, the potent silence, the solemn gaze of a hundred eyes was too much for the old man to bear. Slowly he swung back on two legs of his chair, caught the rungs again with the projecting soles, turned his eyes to the ceiling, closed them, and set himself to imagining the station at Pleasantville. The rout was complete.

Perry wheeled and faced me. The hand was lowered slowly; four fingers disappeared and one long one, one quivering one, remained, a whip with which to chastise the prisoner at the bar.

"Mark Hope," he began, in a deep, rich, resonant voice, "we welcome you home. We have come down from the valley, fourteen mile through the blazin' noonday sun, fourteen mile over wind-swept roads, that you, when agin you step on the soil of our beloved county, may step into lovin' hands, outstretched to meet you and bid you welcome. Welcome home—thrice welcome—agin I say, welcome!"

Both of the orator's hands swung upward and outward, and he looked intently at the ceiling. He seemed prepared to catch me as I leaped from a second-story window. The pause as he stood there braced to receive the body of the returning soldier as it hurtled at him, gave Isaac Bolum an opportunity to be magnanimous. He clapped his hands and cheered. In an instant his shrill cry was drowned in a burst of applause full of spirit and heart, closing with a

flourish of wails from Cevery Pulsifer and the latest of the Kallabergers. Perry's arms fell gracefully to his side and he inclined his head



"WELCOME HOME—THRICE WELCOME!"

and half closed his eyes in acknowledgment. Then turning to Isaac, measuring every word, in a voice clear and cutting, his long forefinger shaking, he cried: "From the bloody battle-fields of Cuby, from her tropic camps where you suffered and bled, you come home to us

to-day. You have fought in the cause of liberty. To your country you have give a limb—you——"

Poor Bolum! Awakened from the gentle doze into which he had fallen the instant Cevery Pulsifer relieved him of the duty of leading the applause, he brought his chair down on all four legs, and slapped both knees violently. Satisfied that they were still there, he looked up at the orator.

"You have give a limb," repeated Perry, emphasizing the announcement by shaking his finger at the old man.

Isaac's mouth was half open for a protest, when he remembered, and leaning over seized the toe of each boot in a hand and wriggled his feet. When we saw his face again he was smiling gently, and swinging back, he nestled his head against the wall and closed his eyes once more.

"You would have give your life," cried Perry.

But the only sign old Bolum made was to twirl the thumbs of his clasped hands.

"Six months ago, six short, stirrin' months

ago you left us, just a plain man, at your country's call." Perry was thundering his rolling periods at us. "To-day, a moment since, standin' here by the track, we heard the rumblin' of the train and the engyne's whistle, and we says a he-ro comes—a he-ro in blue!"

Had Perry looked my way he might have noticed that I was clad in khaki, but he was addressing Henry Holmes, whose worthy head was nodding in continual acquiescence. The old man stood, with eyes downcast and hands clasped before him, a picture of humility. The orator, carried away by his own eloquence, seemed to forget its real purpose, and in a moment, sitting unnoticed in my chair with Tim at my side, I became a minor figure, while half a hundred were gathered there to do honor to Henry Holmes. Once I even forgot and started to applaud when Perry raised his hand over the gray head as though in blessing and said solemnly: "He-ro in blue—agin we bid you welcome!"

A little laugh behind me recalled me to my real place, and with a burning face I turned.

I have in my mind a thousand pictures of one woman. But of them all the one I love most, the one on which I dwell most as I sit of an evening with my pipe and my unopened book, is that which I first saw when I sought the chit who noticed my ill-timed applause and laughed at me. I found her. I saw that she laughed with me and for me, and I laughed too. We laughed together. An instant, and her face became grave.

The orator, now swelling into his peroration, was forgotten. The people of the valley—Tim—even Tim—all of them were forgotten. I had found the woman of my firelight, the woman of my cloudland, the woman of my sunset country down in the mountains to the west. She had always been a vague, undefined creature to me—just a woman, and so elusive as never to get within the grasp of my mind's eye; just a woman whom I had endowed with every grace; whose kindly spirit shone through eyes, now brown, now blue, now black, according to my latest whim; who ofttimes worn, or perhaps feigning weariness, rested on my shoulder a lit-

tle head, crowned with a glory of hair sometimes black, and sometimes golden or auburn, and not infrequently red, a dashing, daring red. Sometimes she was slender and elf-like, a chic and clinging creature. Again she was tall and stately, like the women of the romances. Again she was buxom and blooming, one whose hand you would take instead of offering an arm. She had been an elusive, ever-changing creature, but now that I had looked into those grave, gray eyes, I fixed the form of my picture, and fixed its colors and fired them in to last for all my time.

Now she is just the woman that every woman ought to be. Her hair is soft brown and sweeps back from a low white forehead. She has tried to make it straight and simple, as every woman should, but the angels seem to have curled it here and mussed it there, so that all her care cannot hide its wanton waves. Her face is full of life and health, so open, so candid, that there you read her heart, and you know that it is as good as she is fair.

She stood before me in a sombre gown,

almost ugly in its gray color and severe lines, but to me she was a quaint figure such as might have stepped out of the old world and the old time when men lived with a vengeance, and godliness and ugliness went arm in arm, for Satan had preëmpted the beautiful. Against her a homely garb failed. She was beautiful in spite of her clothes and not because of them. But this is generally true with women. This one, instead of sharing our admiration with her gown, claimed it all for herself. Her face had no rival.

I did not turn away. I could not. The gray eyes, once flashing with the light of kindly humor, now softened with sympathy, now glowed with pity. Pity! The thought of it stirred me with anger. The justice of it made me rage. She saw in the chair a thin, broken figure, a drawn brown face, a wreck of a man. Yesterday—a soldier. To-day—a hero. To-morrow—a crippled veteran, and after that a pensioner drifting fast into a garrulous dotage. She, too, was looking into the future. She knew what I had lost. She saw what I dreaded. Her eyes

told me that. She did not know what I had gained, for she came of a silly people whose blood quickened only to the swing of a German hymn and who were stirred more by the groans of a penitent sinner than the martial call of the bugle.

So it came that I struggled to my crutches and broke rudely in on Perry Thomas's peroration. I had gathered all my strength for a protest against the future. The people of the valley were to know that their kindness had cheered me, but of their pity I wanted none. I had played a small part in a great game and in the playing was the reward. I had come forth a bit bruised and battered, but there were other battles to be fought in this world, where one could have the same fierce joy of the conflict; and he was a poor soldier who lived only to be toted out on Decoration days. I was glad to be home, but gladder still that I had gone. That was what I told them. I looked right at the girl when I said it, and she lifted her head and smiled. They heard how in the early spring in the meadow by the mill-dam Tim and I had stopped

TIM AND I HAD STOPPED OUR PLOUGHS TO DRAW LOTS AND HE HAD LOST

our ploughs to draw lots and he had lost. He had to stay at home, while I went out and saw the world at its best, when it was awake to war and strife, and the mask that hid its emotion was lifted. They heard a very simple story and a very short one, for now that I came to recount it all my great adventure dwindled to a few dreary facts. But as best I knew I told them of the routine of the camp and of the endless drills in the long spring days down there at Tampa before the army took to sea. I spoke of the sea and the strange things we saw there as we steamed along—of the sharks that lolled in our wake, of the great turtles that seemed to sun themselves on the wave-crests, of the pelicans and the schools of flying fishes. Elmer Spiker interrupted to inquire whether the turtles I had seen were "black-legs, red-legs, or yaller-legs." I had not the remotest idea, and said that I could not see how the question was relevant. He replied that it was not, except that it would be of interest to some of those present to learn that there were three distinct kinds of "tortles"—red-legs, black-legs, and "yaller-legs." They were

shipped to the city and all became "tarripine." This annoyed me. Elmer is a great scholar, and it was evident that he was simply airing his wisdom, and rather than give him a second opportunity I tried to hurry to land; but Isaac Bolum awoke and wanted to know if he had been dreaming.

"I thot I heard some one speakin' of flyin' fishes," he said.

It was reckless in me to mention these sea wonders, for now in defence of my reputation for truthfulness, I had to prove their existence. The fabric of my story seemed to hang on them. Elmer Spiker declared that he had heard his grandfather tell of a flying sucker that inhabited the deep hole below the bridge when he was a boy, but this was the same grandfather who had strung six squirrels and a pigeon on one bullet in the woods above the mill in his early manhood. There Elmer winked. Isaac Bolum allowed that they might be trout that had trained themselves in the use of wings, but he did not believe that any ordinary fish such as a chub or a pike or a sunny would care to leave its natural

element to take up with the birds. Perry Thomas began to cough. That cough is always like a snake's warning rattle. Before he had time to strike, I blocked the discussion by promising that if the company suspended judgment I would in the near future prove the accuracy of my statements on flying fishes by the encyclopædia. This promise met with general approval, so I hurried over the sea to the dry land where I knew the ways better and was less likely to arouse higher criticism. I told them of the stirring times in Cuba, till the day came when we stormed the hill, and they had to carry me back to the sea. I told them how lucky I was to get to the sea at all, for often I had closed my eyes, worn out by the pain and the struggle for life, little caring whether ever again I opened them to the light. Then strength came, and hope, and I turned my face to the North, toward the valley and home. It was hard to come back on crutches, but it was better than not to come at all. It was best, to have gone away, else I had never known the joy of the return, and I was pretty sure to stay, now that I was home,

but if they fancied me dozing away my life at the store stove they were mistaken; not that I scorned the learned discussion there, but the frosts were coming soon to stir up sluggish blood, and when the guns were barking in the woods, and the hounds were baying along the ridges, I would be with them.

I looked right at the girl when I said it. I was boasting. She knew it. She must see, too, what a woful figure I should make with strong-limbed fellows like Tim there, and strong-limbed hounds like old Captain, who was lying at my side. But somehow she liked my vaunting speech. I knew it when our eyes met.

III

THE gate latch clicked. From the road Henry Holmes called a last good-night, and Tim and I were alone. We sat in silence, watching through the window the old man's lantern as he swung away toward home. Then the light disappeared and without all was black. The village was asleep.

By the stove lay my hound, Captain, snoring gently. He had tried to keep awake, poor beast! For a time he had even struggled to hold one eye open and on his master, but at last, overcome by weariness, his head snuggled farther and farther down into his fore paws, and the tired tail ceased its rhythmic beating on the floor.

What is home without a dog! Captain is happy. He smiles gently as he sleeps, and it seems that in that strange dog-dreamland he and I are racing over the ridges again, through the nipping winds, on the trail of a fox or a rabbit.

His master is home. He has wandered far to other hunting grounds, but now that the tang is in the air that foretells the frost and snow, he has come again to the dog that never misses a trail, the dog that never fails him.

The hound raised his head and half opened one eye. He was sure that I was really there, and the gleam of white teeth showed a broadening dog-smile. And once more we were away on the dreamland trail—Captain and I.

"He's been counting the days till you got home, Mark," said Tim, holding a burning match over my pipe. "It was a bit lonely here, while you were gone, so Captain and I used to discuss your doings a good deal after the rest of the place had gone to bed. And as for young Colonel, why he's heard so much of you from Captain there, I'm afraid he'll swallow you when he gets at you in the morning."

Young Colonel was the puppy the returning soldier had never seen. He had come long after I had gone away, and as yet I knew him only by his voice, for I had heard his dismal wails down in the barn. In the excitement of the evening

I had forgotten him, but now I raised a warning finger and listened, thinking that I might catch the appealing cry. And is there any cry more appealing than that of a lonely puppy? There was not a sound outside, and I turned to Tim.

My brother lighted his pipe, and leaned back in his chair, and looked at me. I looked at him very, very hard. Then we both began to blow clouds of smoke in each other's faces. Hardly a word had Tim and I passed since that day in the field when I drew the long twig that sent me away and left him behind to keep our home. What a blessing a pipe is at a time like this! Tim says more by the vigor of his smoking than Perry Thomas could express in a year's oration. So we enshrouded our emotions in the gray cloud; but if he did not speak, I knew well what he would be saying, and the harder I puffed the easier did he divine what was uppermost in my mind. For we were brothers! This was the same room that for years had been our world; this the same carpet over which we had tumbled together at our mother's feet. There was the

same cupboard that had been our mountain; here the same chairs that formed our ridges and our valleys. At the table by my side, by the light of this very lamp, we sat together not so very long ago, boys, spelling out with our father, letter by letter, word by word, the stories of the Bible. Here we had lived our little lives; here we were to live what was to come; and where life is as simple as it is with us we grow a bit like the animals about us. We sit together and smoke; we purr, as it were, and know each other's mind. Tim and I purred. Incident by incident, year by year, we travelled down the course of our lives again, over the rough ways, over the smooth ways, smoking and smoking, until at last we brought up together at the present. Not a word had either of us spoken, but at last when our reminiscent wanderings were over and we paused on the threshold of the future, Tim spoke.

"Attractive?" he said in a tone of inquiry.

He was looking at me with eyebrows arched, curiously, and there was a faint suggestion of hostility in the set of his mouth.

Poor Tim! He has seen so little of women! We have them in our valley, of course. But he and I lived much in the great book-land beyond the hills. We had read together of all the heroines of the romances, and we knew their little ways and their pretty speeches as well as if we had ourselves walked with them through a few hundred pages and lived happily ever after. They had been the women of our world as distinct from the women of our valley. The last we knew as kindly, honest persons with a faculty for twisting their English and a woful ignorance of well-turned speeches. They never said "Fair Sir" nor "Master." But I had gone from that book-world and had seen the women of the real world. Here I had the advantage of my brother. Into his life a single woman had come from the real world. She was different from the women of our valley. I had known that the moment our eyes met, and by the way Tim smoked now, and by the tone of his terse inquiry, I knew that he had met a woman who had said "Fair Sir" to him, and I feared for him. It was disturbing. I felt a twinge of jeal-

ousy, but whether for the tall, strong young fellow before me, to whom I had been all, or for the fair-faced girl, I could not for the life of me tell. It seemed to be a bit of both.

"I remarked that she was attractive," said Tim aggressively, for I had kept on smoking in silence.

"Rather," I answered carelessly. "But who is she—a stranger here?"

"Rather," repeated Tim hotly. "Well, you are blind. I suppose you judged her by that ugly gray gown. You thought she was some pious Dunkard."

"I am no enemy of piety," I retorted. "In fact, I hardly noticed her clothes at all, except to think that their simplicity gave her a sort of Priscilla air that was fetching."

Tim softened. "That's it exactly," he said. "But, Mark, you should have seen Mary Warden when she came here."

"From where?" I asked.

"From Kansas. She lived in some big town out West, and when her mother died there was no one left to her but Luther Warden, her uncle.

He sent for her, and now she is living with him. The old man sets a great store by her."

Luther Warden is rich. He has accumulated a fine lot of property above Six Stars—several good farms, a mill and a tannery; but even the chance of inheriting all these did not seem fair compensation for being his niece and having to live with him. He was good to a fault. He exuded piety. Six days of the week he worked, piling up the passing treasures of this world. One whole day he preached, striving for the treasures in that to come. You could not lay a finger on a weak spot in his moral armor, but Tip Pulsifer protected from the assaults of Satan only by a shield of human skin, always seemed to me the better of the two. Tip wore leaky boots all last winter, but when spring came he bought Mrs. Pulsifer a sewing machine. Have you ever worn leaky boots when the snow was banked fence high? Luther Warden's boots never leak. They are always tight and well tallowed. His horses and his cows waddle in their fat, and the wool of his flocks is the longest in the valley. Luther gets up with the sun and

goes to bed with it. Some in our valley think his heavy crops come from his six days of labor, and some from his one day of preaching. He says that the one day does it all, but he keeps on getting out with the sun on the other six. I knew that the poor girl from Kansas must get up with the sun, too, for her uncle was not the man to brook any dawdling. I knew, further, that Sunday could not be a day of rest for her, for of all his people she would have to listen to his preaching.

That was why I murmured in a commiserative tone, "Luther's niece—poor girl!"

"You needn't pity her," Tim snapped. "She knows a heap more about the world than you or I do. She——"

"She is not a Dunkard, then?" I interrupted.

"Not a bit," Tim answered. "I don't know what she was in Kansas, but Luther has preached so much on worldliness and the vanity of fine clothes that it wouldn't look right for his niece to go flaunting frills and furbelows about the valley. That plain gray gown is a concession to the old man. He'd like her to wear a prayer-

cap and a poke bonnet, I guess, but she has a mind of her own. I think she drew the line there."

She had not given up so much, I thought. Perhaps in her self-denial there was method, and her simple garb became her best. Even a prayer-cap might frame her face the fairest; but she must know. And I had seen that in the flash of her eye and the toss of her head that told me that a hundred Luther Wardens, a hundred Dunkard preacher uncles, could not abate her beauty one jot.

"She's rich," said Tim.

He blurted it out. As long as I had seen her and found her beautiful, this announcement seemed uncalled for. Had she been plain of face and figure it might have served a purpose, were my brother endeavoring to excuse the sentimental state of mind he had disclosed to me. He knew that the place he held in my heart was first. This had always been true, and in our lonely innocence we had promised it should be true to the end. There was to be a fair return. He had promised it, and now he was learning

how hard it was to keep faith. His attitude was one of half penitence, half defiance. Had I not seen the girl, had he told me that she was beautiful, and even rich and good, all our boyish pledges would have been swept aside, and I should have cheered him on. But I had seen her. She had laughed with me. Somehow we had understood each other. And now I cared not so much what he felt for her as how she looked on him. For once in our lives Tim and I were fencing.

"She's pretty, Tim," said I, "and rich, you say?"

"Mary has several thousand dollars," he answered. "Besides that, she'll get all old man Warden has to leave, and that's a pretty pile."

"Little wonder she wears that Dunkard gown," said I with the faintest sneer.

It angered Tim.

"That's not fair," he cried. "She's not that kind. Luther Warden is all she has of kin, and if it makes him any happier to see her togged out in that gawky Dunkard gown——"

"Gawky?" said I. "Why, man, on a woman like that a plain dress is simply quaint. She looks like an old Dutch picture. You must not let her change it."

The insinuation of his authority made Tim pound the table with his pipe. He was striving to be angry, but I knew what that furious flush of his face meant. He tried to conceal it by smoking again, but ended in a laugh.

"Oh, nonsense!" he said. Then he laughed again.

"Tell me," I went on, following up my advantage, "when is she coming here, or when are you going to move up there?"

My brother recovered his composure.

"It's all silly, Mark. There is no chance of a girl like that settling down here with a clumsy fellow like me—a fellow who doesn't know anything, who's never been anywhere, who's never seen anything. Why, she's travelled; she's from Kansas; she's lived in big cities. This is nothing but a lark for her. She'll go away some day, and she'll leave us here, grubbing away on our bit of a farm and spending our savings on pow-

der and shot—until we get to the happy hunting grounds."

Tim laughed mournfully. "I've been just a little foolish," he went on, "but I couldn't help it, Mark. It doesn't amount to anything; it never did and never will, and now that you're here and the rabbit season will soon be in, we'll have other things to think of. But you must remember I'm not the only man in the world who's been a bit of a fool in his time."

"No," said I. "May I be spared myself. But see here, Tim, how does it feel?"

"How does what feel?" snapped Tim.

"To be in love the way you are," I answered.

"Oh!" he exclaimed.

He had been taken back, and hesitated between anger and amusement. When Tim hesitates he loses his temper as a sensible man should lose it—he buries it, and his indomitable good humor wins.

"Tip Pulsifer says it's like religion," he answered. "At first it makes you feel all low-down like, and miserable, and you don't care. Then

you either get over it entirely or become so used to it you don't feel it at all."

"May I be spared!" I cried, "and may you get over it."

But the youngster refused to commit himself. He just smiled and smoked, and it seemed as though in his suffering he was half happy. I smoked, too. We smoked together. The silence startled Captain, for the clock struck, and yawning, he arose, trotted to my side, and with one leap he brought his ponderous paws into my lap.

You can trust your dog. He never fails you.

"Well, old chap," I said, as I scratched his nose ever so gently, "you at least have no one to think of but me and Tim there, eh?"

"No," cried Captain heartily.

That was not the exact word that he used, but he expressed it by beating his tail against the table and giving a long howl.

"And if Tim, there, goes dawdling after a woman, we shall stick to the ridges, and the foxes, and the rabbits. We can't go as fast as we used to, Captain, but we can go together, eh?"

"The same as ever and the same forever," cried Captain.

Those were not his exact words, but I saw his

"WELL, OLD CHAP!"

answer in his eyes, for he had climbed higher and they were close to mine. He seemed ready to swallow me.

"And when he brings her home, Captain," said

I, "and fills the whole house with young ones who'll pull your tail and tickle your ears and play horse with my crutches, we shall sit outside and smoke our pipes alone, in peace and quiet, eh, Captain?"

"Oho!" cried Captain. "That we will, and you never need want, Mark, for I've many a fine bone buried away against old age and rainy weather."

"Spoken like a man," said I, slapping the hound on the back.

Tim had lighted a candle. Now he blew out the lamp and stood over me in the half-light, holding out a hand.

"Come," he said. "That's right, put your hand on my shoulder, for the stairs are steep and will trouble you. That's the way. Come along, Captain; to-night we'll all go up together. And when she comes—that woman—we'll go to your house—all three of us—the same as now—eh, Captain?"

IV

"I LOVE soldiers—just love 'em," she said.

"The sentiment is an old one with women," said I. "Were it not so, there would be no soldiers."

"And for that reason you went to war?" she said.

"In part, yes," I answered.

"How I should like to see the woman!" she cried. "How proud she must be of you!"

"Of me?" I laughed. "The woman? Why, she doesn't exist."

"Then why did you turn soldier?"

"I feared that some day there might be a woman, and when that day came I wished to be prepared. I thought that the men who fought would be the men of the future. But I have learned a great deal. They will be the men of the past in a few months. The memory of a battle's heroes fades away almost with the smoke. In a little while, to receive our just rec-

ognition we old soldiers will have to parade before the public with a brass band, and the band will get most attention. Would you know that Aaron Kallaberger was a hero of Gettysburg if he didn't wear an army overcoat?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "I have heard about it so often. He has told me a hundred times."

"I suppose you have told a hundred other persons of Aaron's prowess?" said I.

"No-o-o," she answered.

"And so," said I, "when Perry Thomas finished his oration last night, I had to catch it up; and if my soldiering is to result in any material good to me I must keep that oration moving to the end."

"But will you?" she asked.

How I liked the way she put it! It was flattering—subtly so. She seemed to imply that I was a modest soldier, and if there is a way to flatter a man it is to call him modest. Modesty is one of the best of policies. To call a man honest is no more than to call him healthy or handsome. These are attributes of nearly everyone at some time in his life. But to do a great

deed or a good deed, and to rejoice that it has been done and the world is better for it, and not because you did it and the world knows it, that is different. So often our modesty consists in using as much effort to walk with hanging head and sloping shoulders as we should need for a majestic strut.

She called me modest. Yet there I sat in my old khaki uniform. It was ragged and dirty, and I was proud of it. It was a bit thin for a chilly autumn day, but in spite of Tim's expostulation I had worn it, refusing his offers of a warmer garb. I was clinging to my glory. While I had on that old uniform, I was a soldier. When I laid it aside, I should become as Aaron Kallaberger and Arnold Arker. A year hence people would ask me if I had been a railroad man in my time.

She called me modest. That very morning Tim told me she was coming. She had made some jellies, so she said, for the soldier of the valley. They were her offering to the valley's idol. She thought the idol would consume them, for bachelor cooking was never intended

for bachelor invalids. Tim had mentioned this casually. I suspected that he believed that the visit to me was simply a pretence and that she knew he was to be working in the field by the house. But I took no chances. In the seclusion of my room I brushed every speck off the uniform and made sure that every inch of it fitted snugly and without an unnecessary wrinkle. Then when my hair had been parted and smoothed down, I crowned myself with my campaign hat at the dashingest possible tilt. Thus arrayed I fixed myself on the porch, to be smoking my pipe in a careless, indifferent way when she came. An egotist, you say—a vain man. No—just a man. For who when She comes would not look his best? We prate a lot about the fair sex and its sweet vanities. Yet it takes us less time to do our hair simply because it is shorter.

When Mary comes! The gate latch clicked and I whistled the sprightliest air I knew. Down in the field Tim appeared from the maze of corn-stalks and looked my way beneath a shading hand. There were foot-falls on the

porch. Had they been light I should have kept on whistling in that careless way; but now I looked up, startled. Before me stood not Mary, but Josiah Nummler.

It was kind of Josiah to come, for he is an old man and lives a full mile above the village, half way up the ridge-side. He is very fat, too, from much meditation, and to aid his thin legs in moving his bulky body he carries a very long stick, which he uses like a paddle to propel him; so when you see him in the distance he seems to be standing in a canoe, sweeping it along. Really he is only navigating the road. He had a clothes-prop with him that day, and pausing at the end of the porch, he leaned on it and gasped. I ought to have been pleased to see Josiah.

"Well, Mark," he said, "I am glad you're home. Mighty! but you look improved."

He gasped again and smiled through his bushy beard.

"Thank you," said I, icily, waving him toward a chair.

Josiah sat down and smiled again.

"It just does me good to see you," he said, having completely recovered his power of

JOSIAH NUMMLER.

speech. "I should have come down last night, Mark. I 'pologize for not doin' it, but it's mighty troublesome gittin' 'round in the dark.

The last time I tried it, I caught the end of my stick between two rocks and it broke. There I was, left settin' on the Red Hill with no way of gittin' home. I was in for comin' down here to receive you—really I was—but my missus says she ain't a-goin' to have me rovin' 'round the country that 'ay agin. 'Gimme an extry oar,' I says. And she says: 'Does you 'spose I'll let you run 'round lookin' like a load of wood?' And I says——"

The gate latch clicked. Again Tim appeared from the maze of corn and stood shading his eyes and gazing toward the house. Now the footfalls were light. And Mary came! But how could I look careless and dashing, with Josiah Nummler in the chair I had fixed so close to mine? Rising, I bowed as awkwardly as possible. I insisted on her taking my own rocker, while I fixed myself on the floor with a pillar for a back-rest. Not a word did the girl say, but she sat there clutching the little basket she held in her lap.

"Eggs?" inquired Josiah.

She shook her head, but did not enlighten him.

"I should judge your hens ain't layin' well, figurin' on the size of the basket," said the old man, ignoring her denial. "There's a peculiarity about the hens in this walley—it's somethin' I've noticed ever since I was a boy. I've spoke to my missus about it and she has noticed the same thing since she was a girl—so it must be a peculiarity. The hens in this walley allus lays most when the price of eggs is lowest."

This was a serious problem. It is not usual for Josiah to be serious, either, for he is generally out of breath or laughing. Now he was wagging his head solemnly, pulling his beard, and over and over repeating, "But hens is contrary—hens is contrary."

Mary contrived to drop the basket to her side, out of the old man's sight.

"Speakin' of hens," he went on. "My missus was sayin' just yesterday how as——"

Tim was shouting. He was calling something to me. I could not make out what it was, for the wind was rustling the corn-shocks, but I arose and feigned to listen.

"It's Tim," said I. "He's calling to you, Josiah. It's something about your red heifer."

"Red heifer—I haven't no red heifer," returned the old man.

"Did I say heifer? I should have said hog—excuse me," said I, blandly.

"But I have killed all my hogs," Josiah replied, undisturbed.

Tim shouted again, making a trumpet of his hands. To this day I don't know what he was calling to us, but when this second message reached Josiah's ears, it concerned some cider we had, that Tim was anxious to know if he would care for. At the suggestion Josiah's face became very earnest, and a minute later he was hurrying down the field to the spot where Tim's hat and Tip Pulsifer's shaggy hair showed above the wreck of a corn-shock.

"How could you hear what Tim was saying?" Mary asked.

It was almost the first word she had spoken to me, and I was in my chair again, and she was where I had planned so cunningly to have her.

"I know my brother's voice," I answered gravely.

"I couldn't make out a word," said she, "but it isn't like him to let an old man go tottering over fields to see him. He would have come up here."

"I guess he would." There was a twinkle in her eyes and I knew it was useless to dissemble. "Tim and I are different. I never hesitate to use strategy to get my chair, even at the expense of a feeble old man."

"How gallant you are," she said with a touch of scorn.

"You must not scold," I cried. "Remember I had reason, after all. You did not come to see Josiah Nummler."

She was taken by surprise. It was brutal of me. But somehow the old reckless spirit had come back. I was speaking as a soldier should to a fair woman, bold and free. That's what a woman likes. She hates a man who stutters love. And while I did not own to myself the least passion for the girl, I had seen just enough of her on the evening before and I had smoked just

enough over her that morning to be in a sentimental turn of mind that was amusing. And I gained my point. She turned her head so as almost to hide her face from me, and I heard a gentle laugh.

"All's fair in love and war," I said, "and were Josiah twice as old, I should be justified in using those means to this end."

Then I rocked. There is something so sociable about rocking. And I smoked. There is something so sociable about smoking. For a moment the girl sat quietly, screening her face from me. Then she began rocking too, and I caught a sidelong glance of her eye, and the color mounted to her cheeks, and we laughed together.

So it came that she suddenly stopped her rocking, and dropping the little basket at my feet, exclaimed: "I love soldiers—just love them!"

Then I told her that I must keep Perry Thomas's oration going to the end, and she leaned toward me, her hands clasped, her eyes fixed on mine and asked: "But will you?"

"I can make no promises," I answered. "They say our bodies change entirely every seven years. Mark Hope, age fifty, will be a different man from Mark Hope, age twenty-three. He may have nothing to boast about himself, and his distorted mind may magnify the deeds of the younger man. Now the younger man refuses to commit himself. He will not be in any way responsible for his successors."

"How wise you are!" she cried.

"Wise?" I exclaimed, searching her face for a sign of mockery. But there was none.

"I mean you talk so differently from the others in the valley. Either they talk of crops or weather, or they sit in silence and just look wise. I suppose you have travelled?"

"As compared to most folks in Black Log I am a regular Gulliver," I answered. "My father was a much-travelled man. He was an Englishman and came to the valley by chance and settled here, and to his dying day he was a puzzle to the people. That an Englishman should come to Six Stars was a phenomenon. That Isaac Bolum and Henry Holmes should be born

here was no mere chance—it was a law of nature."

"And this English father?"

"He married, and then Tim and I came to Black Log."

"Like Isaac Bolum and Henry Holmes?"

"Exactly; and we should have grown like them, but our father was a bookish man, and with him we travelled; we went with Dickens and Thackeray and those fellows, and as we came to different places in the books, he told us all about them. He'd seen them all, so we got to know his country pretty well. Once he took us to Harrisburg, and by multiplying everything we saw there, Tim and I were able to picture all the great cities of the world—for instance, London is five hundred times Harrisburg."

"But why didn't you go to see the places yourself?"

"Why doesn't everybody in Black Log go to Florida in winter or take the waters at Carlsbad? We did plan a great trip—father and mother and Tim and I—we were going to England together when the farm showed a surplus.

We never saw that surplus. I went to Philadelphia once. It's a grand place, but I had just enough of money to keep me there two days and bring me home. Then the war came. And now Tim thinks I've been around the world. He's jealous, for he has never been past Harrisburg; but I've really gone around a little circle. I've seen just enough of flying fishes to hanker after Mandalay, just enough of Spaniards to long for a sight of Spain. But they've shipped me home and here I am anchored. Here I shall stay until that surplus materializes; and you know in our country we have neither coal nor oil nor iron."

"But they tell me that you are to teach the school," she said.

"For which I am grateful," I answered. "Twenty dollars a month is the salary, and school keeps for six months, so I shall earn the large sum of $120 a year."

"But your pension?"

"With my pension I shall be a nabob in Six Stars. Anywhere else I should cut a very poor figure. But after all, this is the best place, for is there any place where the skies are bluer; is

there any place where the grass is greener; is there any place where the storms are wilder than over our mountains?"

"Sometimes I would say in Kansas," the girl answered. "Here the world seems to end at the top of the mountain. It is hard to picture anything beyond that. Out there you raise yourself on tiptoe, and you see the world rolling away for miles and miles, and it seems to have no ending."

"I suppose you will not be able to endure your imprisonment. Some day you will go back to Kansas."

"Some day—perhaps," she laughed. "But now I am a true Black Logger. Look at my gown."

It was the gray Dunkard dress—the concession to her uncle's beliefs on worldliness. It was the first time I had noticed it.

"That is not the garb of Black Log," I said. "It was designed long ago in Germany, after patterns from Heaven."

"And designed by men," said Mary, laughing; "forced by them on a sex which wears ribbons as naturally as a bird does feathers."

"In other words, when you came to live with your pious uncle, he picked you?"

"Exactly," she said; "but I submitted humbly. I came here, as I supposed, a fairly good Christian, with an average amount of piety and an average number of faults. My worldliness shocked my uncle, and being a peaceful person, I let him pick me. But I rebelled at the bonnet —spare me from one of those coal-scuttles—I'll go to the stake first."

In her defiance she swung her own straw hat wildly around on the string. Pausing, she smoothed out the gray gown and eyed it critically.

"Was such a thing ever intended for a woman to wear!" she exclaimed.

"For most women, surely not," said I. "Few could carry that handicap and win. But after all, your uncle means it kindly. He acts from interest in your soul's welfare."

Mary's face became serious.

"Yes," she said, "he has paid me the highest compliment a man can pay to a woman—he wants to meet me in Heaven."

How could I blame Luther Warden?

I had forgotten my uniform and my glory, my hair and my hat, and was leaning forward with my eyes on the girl. And she was leaning toward me and our heads were very close. The rebellious brown hair was almost in the shade of my own dashing hat-brim.

Then I said to myself in answer to the poet, "Here's the cheek that doth not fade, too much gazed at." For its color was ever changing. And again I said to myself and to the poet, when my glance had met hers, and the color was mounting higher: "Here's the maid whose lip mature is ever new; here's the eye that doth not weary." And now aloud, forgetfully, leaning back in my chair and gazing at her from afar off—"Here's the face one would meet in every place."

Mary's chair flew back, and it was for her to gaze at me from afar off.

"What were you saying?" she demanded in a voice not "so very soft."

"Was I saying anything?" I answered, feigning surprise. "I thought I was only thinking. But you were speaking of Luther Warden."

"Was I?" she said, more quietly, but in an absent tone.

"You said he had paid you a great compliment, but do you know——"

I paused, being a bit nervous, and flushed, for she was looking right at me. Not till she turned away did I finish.

"Do you know," I went on, "last night when I saw you, I thought we must have met before, and I thought if I had met you anywhere before, it must have been in Heaven."

I had expected that at a time like this Josiah Nummler would appear. In that I was disappointed. In his place, with a bark and a bound, came a lithe setter, a perfect stranger to me, and Mary seized the long head in her hands and cried: "Why, Flash—good Flash."

She completely ignored my last remark, and patted the dog and talked to him.

"Isn't he a beauty?" she cried. "He is Mr. Weston's."

"Whose?" I asked, concealing my irritation. "Mr. Weston—and who is Mr. Weston?"

Mary held up a warning finger. There were

footfalls on the gravel walk around the house.

"Sh," she whispered, "here he comes—no one knows who he is."

To this day Robert Weston's age is a mystery to me; I might venture to guess that it is between thirty and fifty. Past thirty all men begin to dry up or fatten, and he was certainly a lean person. His face was hidden beneath a beard of bristling, bushy red, and he had a sharp hook nose and small, bright eyes. From his appearance you could not tell whether he was a good man or a bad one, wise or stupid, kind-hearted or a brute. He seemed of a neutral tone. His clothes marked him as a man of the city, for we do not wear shooting jackets, and breeches and leather leggings in our valley. In the way he wore them there was something that spoke the man of the world, for in such a costume we of Black Log should feel dressed up and ill at ease; but his clothes seemed a part of him. They looked perfectly comfortable and he was unconscious of them. This is where the city men have an advantage over us country-breds. I can carry

off my old clothes without being awkward. I could enter a fine drawing-room in the patched blouse I wear a-hunting with more ease than in that solemn-looking frock-coat I bought at the county town five years ago. In that garment I feel that "I am." No one could ever convince me that I am a mere thought, a dream, a shadow. Every pull in the shoulders, every hitch in the back, every kink in the sleeves makes me a profound materialist. But I don't suppose Weston would bother spreading the tails out when he sat down. I doubt if he would know he had it on. He is so easy in his ways. I saw that as he came swinging around the house, and I envied him for it.

"Well, I am in luck!" he cried cheerfully. "Here I came to see the valley's soldier and I find him holding the valley's flower."

This to me was rather an astounding thing to say, and if he intended to disable me in the first skirmish he succeeded admirably, for my only answer was a laugh; and the more I laughed the more foolish and slow-witted I felt. I wanted to run to Mary's aid, but I did not know how, and

while I was rummaging my brain for some way to meet him, she was answering him valiantly.

"Almost, but not quite," she said. "But he

HE DID NOT STOP TO HEAR MY ANSWER.

has earned the right to hold the valley's flower entirely—whoever she may be. It's a pity, Mr. Weston, you have not been doing so, too, instead

of loafing around the valley all summer long."

She did not speak sharply to him, and that angered me. She was smiling as she spoke, and he did not seem to mind it at all.

"I came to see the veteran," he said, "and not to be scolded."

"You may have my chair then." Mary was rising. "I shall leave you to the veteran—if he does not object."

She was moving away.

"Then I shall have to go with you," said the stranger calmly, "if the veteran doesn't object. He knows a woman should not go unattended around the valley. He'd rather see me doing my duty than having a sociable pipe with him and hearing about the war. How about it, Hope?"

He did not stop to hear my answer. Had he waited a moment instead of striding after the girl, with his dog at his heels, he might have seen my reply.

I raised my pipe above my head and hurled it against the fence, where it crashed into a score of pieces.

V

"WHO is Robert Weston?" I asked of Tim.

"If you can answer that question Theophilus Jones will give you a cigar," replied my brother. "He has tried to find out; he has cross-questioned every man, woman, and child that comes to his store, and he admits that he is beaten."

"When Theop can't find out, the mystery is impenetrable." I recalled our suave storekeeper and his gentle way of drawing from his customers their life secrets as he leaned blandly over the counter with his sole thought apparently to do their commands. Theophilus had known that I was going to enlist long before I had made up my own mind. He had told Tim that I was coming home before he had handed him the postal card on which I had scrawled a few lines announcing my return. So when I heard that Weston was still a puzzle to him I knew that Six Stars had a mystery. For Six Stars to

have a mystery is unusual. Occasionally we are troubled with ghosts and such supernatural demonstrations, which cause us to keep at home at night, but we soon forget these things if we do not solve them. But for our village to number among its people a man whose whole history and whose family history was not known was unheard of. For such a man to be here six weeks and not enlighten us was hardly to be dreamed of. Robert Weston had dared it. Even Tim regarded the matter as serious.

"It is suspicious," he said, shaking his head gravely.

He was cleaning up the supper dishes at the end of the table opposite me. By virtue of my recent return I had not fallen altogether into our household ways as yet, and sat smoking and watching him.

"It's mighty odd," he went on. "At noon one day, about six weeks ago, Weston rode up to the tavern on a bicycle and told Elmer Spiker he was going to stay to dinner. He loafed about all that afternoon, and stayed that day and the next, and ever since. First there came a trunk

for him, and then a dog. You see him about all the time, for when he isn't walking, he's loafing around the tavern, or is over at the store, arguing with Henry Holmes or Isaac Bolum. Yet all we know about him is that he's undecided how long he'll stay and that he has lived in New York."

"Has no one asked him point-blank what he is doing here?"

"No. Isaac Bolum declares every day that he is going to, but when the time comes he breaks down. Every other means of finding out has been taken."

"Josiah Nummler told me to-day he believed Weston was a detective."

"That was Elmer Spiker's theory. But, as Theop says, who is he detecting?"

Theophilus settled that theory conclusively, in my mind, at least, for I knew every man, woman, and child in the valley; and taking a mental census, I could find no one who seemed to require watching by a hawkshaw.

"Perry Thomas guessed he was an embezzler," said Tim, putting the last dish in the

cupboard and sitting down to his pipe. "Perry says Weston is the best-learned man he ever met, and that embezzlers are naturally educated or they would not be in places where they could embezzle."

"A truly Perryan argument," said I; "and after all, a reasonable one, for no one would think of looking here for a fugitive."

"That's just what Perry says," rejoined Tim. "But Theop has read every line in the papers for weeks, and he swears that no embezzlers are missing now."

"Perhaps his crime is still concealed," I ventured.

"That was just what Isaac Bolum thought," Tim answered. "But Henry Holmes says no missing criminal is likely to have a setter dog shipped to him. He says such a man might send for his clothes, but he would draw the line on dogs."

"Perhaps he has deserted his wife," I said, seeing at last a possible solution of the mystery.

"That's what Arnold Arker suggested just a few days ago," returned Tim; "but Tip Pulsifer

allowed that no fellow would have to come so far to desert his wife."

"Tip ought to know," said I, "for he deserts his once a year, regularly."

"He always comes back the next day," retorted Tim stoutly.

My brother has always been Tip's champion in his matrimonial disagreements, and whenever Pulsifer flees across the mountain, swearing terrible oaths that he will never return, Tim goes straight to the clearing on the ridge and talks long and seriously to the deserted wife about her duty.

But there was reason in Tip's contention regarding Weston. Indeed, from Tim's account of events, I could see that the store had very thoroughly threshed out the whole case and that the problem was not one that could be solved by abstract reasoning. There was only one person to solve it, and that was Robert Weston himself.

I knew enough of the world to know that it was not an unheard-of thing for a man to settle for a time in an out-of-the-way village. I knew enough of men to understand that he might con-

SWEARING TERRIBLE OATHS THAT HE WILL NEVER RETURN.

sider it nobody's business why he cared to live among us. I had enough sense of humor to see that he might find amusement in enveloping himself in mystery and sparring with the sly sages of the store and tavern. By right I should have stood by and watched the little game; I should have encouraged Isaac Bolum and Henry Holmes to apply the interrogating probe; I should have warned Weston of the plotting at the store to lay bare the secret of his life; I should have brought the contending parties together and enjoyed the duello. Instead, I had to admit to myself a curiosity as to the stranger's identity that equalled, if it did not surpass, that of Theophilus Jones. His was curiosity pure and simple; mine was something more. Weston had come quietly into my own castle, had taken complete possession of it for a moment, and then calmly walked away with the fairest thing it held—and all so quietly and with an air that in a thousand years of practice, I or none other in the valley could have simulated. The picture was still sharp in my mind as I sat there smoking and drawing Tim out; for when I had

vented my anger on my pipe that morning I had hurried to the gate to watch my departing visitors as they swung down the village street. Weston, lanky and erect, moved with a masterful stride, not unlike the lean and keen-witted setter that flashed to and fro over the road before him. At his side was the girl, a slender body in drab, tossing her hat gayly about at the end of its long string. They passed the store and the mill, and at the bend were lost to my view. They seemed to find themselves such good company! Even Tim, so fine and big, had in this homely, lanky man a rival well worth watching.

And who was the quiet, lanky man? Over and over I asked myself the question, and when I touched its every phase I found that Henry Holmes or Isaac Bolum, some one of the store worthies, had met defeat there before me. At last I gave up, and by a sudden thought arose and pulled on my overcoat, and got my hat. Tim was surprised.

"You are not going out?" he said.

"I think I'll stroll down to the tavern and see this stranger," I replied carelessly. "No, you

needn't come. I can find my way alone all right, for the moon will be up and it's only a step."

It did seem to me that Tim might insist on bearing me company, knowing as he did that I was still a bit rickety; but he saw fit to take my one refusal as final, and muttered something about reading. Then I left him.

It has been years since they have had a license at our tavern, so there was a solitary man in the bar-room when I entered. Elmer Spiker, mine host of the inn, was huddled close to the stove, and was reading by the light of a lamp. Pausing at the threshold before opening the door, the sonorous mumble sounding through the deal panels misled me. Believing the Spiker family at prayers, I stood reverently without until the service seemed to last too long to be one of devotion. Then I opened a crack and peeked in. Seeing a lone man at the distant end of the room, I entered. Elmer's back was toward me and my presence was unnoticed. His eyes were on the paper before him.

"W. J. Mandelberger, of Martins Mills, was among us last Friday," he read, slowly, distinct-

ly, measuring every word. "He paid his subscription for the year and informed us that Mrs. Mandelberger had just presented him with a bouncing baby boy. Congratulations, W. J."

I coughed apologetically, but Elmer rattled the paper just then, and did not notice me.

He went rumbling on: "William Arker, of Popolomus, and Miss Myrtle McGee, of Turkey Valley, were united in the holy bonds of matrimony on the sixth ultimo."

"Elmer," I said sharply, thumping the floor with a crutch.

Spiker turned slowly.

"Oh," he exclaimed, "is that you? Excuse me; I was reading the news. Everybody ought to keep up with what's happenin'. The higher up we gits on the ladder of human intelligence, the more news we have—we can see furder."

Having evolved this sage remark, Elmer twisted back to his old position and raised the paper.

"Now mind this," he said. "Jonas Parker and his wife and four of his children were——"

"See here," I cried, pounding the floor again.

"I don't care for Jonas Parker and all of his children. Where is Mr. Weston?"

"Oh," said Elmer, "excuse me. I thought you had come to see me. It's Weston, eh? Well, his room's just there at the head of the stairs."

He pointed to the door which gave an entrance to the rear hall, but as I wished to be a bit formal in my call on the stranger, I suggested that Mr. Spiker might oblige me by seeing if the gentleman was at home. This seemed entirely unnecessary to mine host, and he wanted to argue the point. But I insisted, and he arose with a sigh, and taking the lamp in his hand, disappeared, leaving me in utter darkness. The door banged shut behind him and I heard him at the foot of the stairs roaring "Ho-ho-there-ho!"

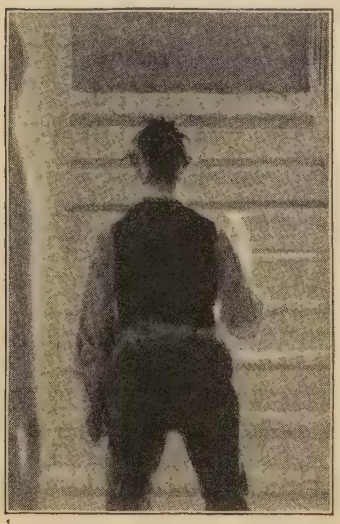
No answer came from the floor above. Again sounded the stentorian tones.

"Mark says as if you are there, you're to come down; he wants to see you."

A last "Ho-there-ho"; a long silence; the door opened. There was light again and Elmer was before me.

"He ain't there, I guess," he said. "Still, if you want me to make sure, I'll go up."

Inasmuch as mine host's cries must still be echoing in the uttermost parts of the house, it seemed needless to compel him to take the climb. Spiker agreed with me. It was not surprising that Weston was out, for he was an odd one, always spooking around somewhere, investigating everything, and asking questions. His room was full of books in various languages, and when he wasn't wandering about the valley, he would be sitting reading far into the night—sometimes as late as half-past ten. There was a fellow named Goth, who seemed to be Weston's favorite writer. This Goth was a Pennsylvania Dutchman, and as Elmer's own ancestors were from Allentown,



NO ANSWER CAME FROM THE FLOOR ABOVE.

he thought he'd like to take up the language, so he'd borrowed from his guest a book called "The Sorrows of Werther." Of all the rubbish that was ever wrote, them "Sorrows" were the poorest. Elmer had only figured out a page and a half, but that gave him enough insight into their character to convince him that a man who could set reading them till half-past ten was—here mine host tapped his forehead and winked. Curious chap, Weston. Elmer had seen a heap of men in his time and never met the like. There's no way to get to see men and understand them like keeping a hotel. When you've "kept" for about forty years, there's hardly a man comes along that you can't set right down in his particular class before he's even registered. But Weston had blocked him at every turn. Elmer knew no more of the man now than on the day he came. In fact, he was getting more and more tangled up about him all the time. For instance, why should one who could read Goth and understand the "Sorrows," want to set around the store and argue with such-like ignoramuses as Ike Bolum and Hen Holmes? Spiker was

willing to bet that right now Weston was over the way trying to prove to them that two and two was four.

The suggestion seemed a likely one, so I interrupted the flow of Elmer's troubled thoughts to say good-night, and went out. I paused a moment on the porch. A lamp was blazing in the store and I could plainly see everyone gathered along the counter. Henry Holmes was standing with his back to the stove, one hand wagging up and down at the solemn line of figures on the bench. But Weston was not there. And in our valley, when a man is not at home o'night he should be at the store, else there is a mystery to be solved. To solve this one I stopped on the tavern steps, leaned against a pillar, and gazed through the dozing village.

At the head of the street where our house stood a bright light burned. There Tim was and there I should be also. A hundred times down South on my post at night, with my back on the rows and rows of white tents, I had sought to pierce the black gloom before me as if there I could see that same light—the home light. Often I fancied I saw it, and in its bright circle Tim

was bending over his book. Here it was in truth, calling me, but I turned from it and looked away over the flats, where another light was winking on the hillside.

Behind that hill, on the eastward ridge, a great ball is glowing, fiery red. Higher and higher it rises, into the tree-tops, then over them; higher and higher, bathing the valley in soft, white light, uncovering the gray road that climbs the ridge-side; higher and higher, until the pines on the ridge-top stand out boldly, fringing into the sky; higher and higher, casting mysterious shadows over the meadows, touching with light the hillside, new-ploughed and naked; clear and white lies the road over the flats to the hill there—clear and white and smooth. On the hillside the light is burning. It is only a short half mile, and the way is easy. In the old house at the end of the street another light is blinking solemnly. Beneath it Tim is waiting. He misses me. He wonders why I am so long. Soon he will be coming. Base deserter, truly! But for once—this once—for the white road over the flat and up the hillside leads to the light!

VI

"WHY, Mark, but you did give me a start!" cried Luther Warden, laying down his book and hurrying forward to greet me.

It was not surprising that the good man should be taken back, for in all the years we had lived together in the valley this was my first evening visit. So unusual an occurrence required an explanation, so I said that I just happened to be taking a stroll and dropped in for a minute. I glanced at Mary to see if she understood my feeble subterfuge, but I met only a frank smile, as though, like her uncle, she believed that I was likely to go hobbling about on moonlight nights this way. Luther never doubted me.

"It's good of you to drop in," he said, after he had fixed me in his own comfortable chair and drawn up the settee for himself. "When I was

livin' alone up here I often used to wish some of you young folks would come in of an evenin' and keep me company and join me in readin' the Good Book. It used to be lonely sometimes, but since I've got Mary it ain't so bad. But I hope her bein' here won't make no difference, and now as you've started you'll come just the same as if I was alone."

I assured him that I would come just the same. That made Mary laugh. She had been sitting in the lamp-lit circle, and now she rocked back into the shade, so, craning my neck, I could just see the dark outline of her face. She made some commonplace but kindly speech of welcome, and I was about to engage her, seeking to draw her from the shadow, when her uncle suddenly interposed himself between us and took a book from the table. Drawing the settee closer to the light, he opened the great volume across his knees and adjusted his spectacles. Throwing back his head and looking at me benignly from under his glasses, he said: "It's peculiarly fortunate you come to-night, Mark. When you knocked I was readin' aloud to Mary. We read

together every night now, her and me, and most instructin' we find it."

I told Luther that it was too much for me to allow him to wear out his eyes reading to me; much as I should enjoy it, I could not hear of it, but I would ask him to let me have the volume when he had finished with it. It did seem that this should bring Mary into the light again, and that she would support my protests; but calmly and quietly she spoke from the darkness, like a voice from another world, "Go on, Uncle Luther; I want Mr. Hope to hear this."

Now had Mary Warden called me by my Christian name she would have followed the custom of our valley and it would have passed unnoticed; but when she used that uncalled-for "Mister" her uncle looked around sharply. First he tried to pierce the shadows and see her, but she drew farther and farther into the darkness. So he gazed at me. He was beginning to suspect that after all I had not come to see him. Had Mark Hope become proud? Was Mary falling again into the ways of the wicked world from which he was striving so hard to wean her,

that she should thus address one of the humblest of God's creatures, a mere man? Old Luther rubbed his spectacles very carefully and slowly; blowing on them and rubbing them again; finally adjusting them, he leaned forward and tried to study the girl's face, to find there some solution of the puzzle.

"Read to Mr. Hope," she said clearly, and with just a touch of defiance.

Had she used some endearing term the old man could not have frowned harder than when he turned on me then, and eyed me through his great spectacles.

"Yes, read to us, Luther," said I calmly: "Miss Warden and I will listen."

"God has been very good to me," said the old man solemnly, "and I've not yet heard Him call me Mister Luther Warden. I s'pose with you and your kind, when He comes to you, He calls you Mister Mark Hope."

This rather took me back, and I stammered a feeble protest, but he did not heed me. Turning to Mary, he went on: "And you, Mary Warden, I s'pose at such times you are 'Miss.'

What wanity! What wanity! Politeness, they calls it. Politeness? Well, in the great eternity, up above, where they speaks from the heart, you'll be just Mark and just Mary. But down yander—yander, mind ye—the folks will probably set more store by titles." The old preacher was pointing solemnly in the direction of the cellar.

There was a long pause, an interval of heavy silence. Then from Mary in the darkness came, "Well, Uncle, let us hope that when we reach that great eternity, Mark and I will be good enough friends to lay aside such vanities."

"Right!" cried Luther, smiling again, and speaking real heartily.

"Right," said I; "and we'll begin eternity to-day, won't we, Mary?"

"We will," said she.

And in my heart I blessed Luther Warden. Guilelessly, the old man, in a few words, had swept away the barrier Mary and I had raised between us. He had added years to our friendship. So had he stopped there it would have been wonderfully well; but he had to go

floundering innocently on. He was laughing softly.

"Do you know, Mark," he said, rubbing his spectacles nervously, "she made me jealous of you when she talked that way. I thought she'd set her cap for you, I did. Whenever a man and woman gits polite, whenever they has to bow and scrape that way, a-misterin' and a-missin' one another, they're hiding somethin'; they ain't actin' open. So I was beginnin' to think mebbe she wanted to marry you and——"

"Go on reading—please read to us," pleaded Mary.

"Yes, do read to us," I echoed, for the position was a new one to me, and at best I am awkward and slow-witted where women are concerned. I could not adroitly turn the old man's wandering speculation into a general laugh as Weston would have done. My best was to break in rudely.

"Well—if I must," Luther said, opening the great book across his knees.

A long silence followed. I heard the solemn ticking of the clock on the mantel behind me; I

heard Mary laughing softly in her retreat beyond the table; I heard Luther, now bending over his book, mumbling to himself a few words of the text.

"It is about the faymine in Injy," he said at last, holding his place on the page with a long, thin forefinger, and looking up at me. "There are three volumes, and this is the second. The third is yit to come. I pay a dollar a year and every year I gits a new volume. It's a grand book, too, Mark. It was wrote by one of our brethren, Brother Matthias Pennel, who went to Injy in charge of a shipload of grain gathered by our people for the sufferin' heathen. The first volume tells all about the gittin' up of the subscription and the sailin' of the wessel. Brother Matthias is a grand writer, and he tells all about Injy and the heathen, and how the wessel reached the main place there—what's the place, Mary?—you're allus good on geography!"

"Calcutta," prompted Mary.

"Yes, I mind now—Calcutty. Well, from there Brother Matthias went up into the coun-

try called—I can't just mind the exact name—oh, here it is—B-a-l-l-e-r-r-a-d Ballerrad—e-r-a-d—Ballerraderad."

Luther paused and sighed. "Them names—them names!" he exclaimed. "If there is one thing that convinces me that the story of the Tower of Babel is true, it is the names of the towns in Injy."

It seemed to me that perhaps from the viewpoint of the East Indian, the same thing might be said of our "villes" and "burgs," and I was about to raise my voice in behalf of the maligned heathen, when my host resumed his discourse.

"When you come in, I was readin' about a poor missionary woman in Baller—Baller—Ballerraderad—whose Sunday-school had been largely eat up by taggers. Her name was Flora Martin, Brother Matthias says, and she was one of the saintliest women he ever seen. He tells how the month before he come to Baller—Baller—Baller-daddad—an extry large tagger had been sneakin' around the mission-house, a-watchin' for scholars, and how one day, when,

according to Brother Matthias, this here Flora Martin, armed only with a rifle and girded about with the heavenly sperrit—how this here Flora——"

There was a ponderous knock on the door, and then the knob began to rattle violently. The bolt had been shot, so Luther had to rise in haste to admit the new-comer, leaving Flora Martin with nothing but the rifle and the heavenly spirit.

Perry Thomas stepped in.

"I just happened to be passin' and thought I'd drop in for a spell," he said, with a profound bow to Mary, who arose to greet him.

This apology of Perry's was as absurd as mine had been, for he lived a mile on the other side of the village; and as the next house was over the ridge, a good three miles away, it was odd that he should be wandering aimlessly about thus. Besides, he had on his new Prince Albert, and there was a suspicion of a formal call in the smoothly oiled hair and tallowed boots. He carried his fiddle, too. There was to my mind every evidence that the visit had been preconceived, and to this point had been carried out with an

eye on every detail. Had the contrary been true, there would have been no cause for Perry to glare at me as he did. The he-ro in blue was anything but welcome now. Indeed, it seemed that could Perry's wish have been complied with, I should be back on the "lead-strewn fields of Cuby."

Mary was most cordial. She seized his fiddle and his hat and stowed them carefully away together, while Luther, pushing the latest visitor to a place at his side on the settee, told him how fortunate he was to drop in just at that time, as he would hear a few interesting things about the famine in India.

Perry was positively ungrateful. He declared that he could only stay a minute at the most, and that it was really not worth Luther's while to begin reading. Mary said that she would not hear of him leaving. She had hidden his hat and would insist on his playing; that was, if I did not mind and her uncle gave his permission. Perry smiled. There was less fire in his eyes when I vowed that not till I had listened again to the song of his beloved violin would I stir

from my chair. So he settled back to pay the price and hear the story of Flora Martin and the tiger.

Luther repeated his account of the book and the story of Brother Matthias Pennel. He told Perry of Sister Flora and her saintly character, and of the devastation by the fierce king of the Bengal jungle. He brought us again to where the frail little woman determined to fight death with death. And here, in low, rumbling tones, letter by letter, word by word, we took up the narrative of the adventurous Dunker brother.

"Thus armed with only a heavy elephant rifle, the property of the foreign missionary society, and clad only in grace, Flora Martin began her lonely vigil on the roof of the mission-house, which is used both as a dwelling and Sunday-school by those who are carrying light to the heathen in Ballerraderad, which, we must remember, is one of the most populous provinces in all Injy. This combined dwelling and church edifice stands at the far end of the little village, and as the lonely Indian moon was just rising above the horizon, Sister Flora heard a series of

catlike footsteps along the veranda beneath her —for we must remember that in this part of our globe the nights are strangely still and the sounds therefore carry for a great distance. Breathlessly Flora Martin, mindful of the slumbering innocent charges sleeping below her, and over whom she was watching, leaned out over the roof, rifle in hand. The footsteps came nearer and nearer and——"

There was a gentle rat-tat-tat on the door. It was so gentle that Luther thought his ears were deceiving him, for while he stopped reading, he made no motion to rise, but sat listening. Again they came, three polite taps, seeming to say, "I should like to get in, but pray don't disturb yourself."

"Come in," shouted the old preacher, not even looking around, for he still seemed to doubt his sense of hearing.

The door opened quietly and Mr. Robert Weston appeared before us. Mary had slipped from her place to meet him, and in Weston's greeting to her I had my first lesson in what the world calls manner. How clumsy seemed my

own excuses for coming at all, compared to his pleasure at finding her at home! He had been looking forward all afternoon to seeing her again. As he shook hands with Luther, he was so hearty that the old man took his guest by the shoulders and declared fervidly that he was rejoiced that he had come. Weston did not glare at Perry Thomas, nor at me either. We but added to his pleasure. Truly his cup of joy was overflowing! And the famine in India—indeed—indeed! The subject was one which interested him deeply, and if Mr. Warden cared for it, he would send him several books on the far East which he had in his library at home. He hoped that in return he might some time have the pleasure of reading carefully, cover to cover, the fat volume that Luther had spread across his knees. Meantime, he would insist on not interrupting. But Mary must be comfortably seated before he could take the place on the settee that Luther had arranged for him, and he must hear all over again the story of the book, of Brother Matthias Pennel and Sister Flora Martin. How I envied him! What must Perry and I seem be-

side this lanky man with his kindly, easy ways! Perry, of course, did not see it. He was smiling, for Weston was telling him that he had stood at the Thomas gate for a half hour the very evening before, listening to the strains of a violin. He hoped to hear that melody again, when Mr. Warden had finished the story of the brave missionary of Ballerraderad.

The Dunker preacher was beaming. He forgot the great doctrine of humility, and declared that "Mister" Weston should have the volume that very night. There was nothing better to give a clear view of the character of the work than Brother Matthias Pennel's account of the heroism of Sister Flora. So we composed ourselves again to hear of the battle to the death between the noble missionary woman and the mighty Bengal.

"Nearer and nearer came the footsteps," read Luther, pausing at each word to make sure of it. "Furder and furder out over the top of the mission-house leaned Sister Flora, and as she leaned she thought how much depended on her that night; for she must remember that there

were sleeping within the walls of the mission-house forty-seven children, thirty of which were females under the age of eleven years, and seventeen males, of whom not one-half had reached the age of nine years. Next she saw a dark object crouching below her. She saw two fiery eyes; she saw the tiger gather himself preparatory to springing. She——"

Perry Thomas's knock had been ponderous, thunderous, and clumsy. Weston's had been self-assured, but polite. Now came a series of raps, now loud, now low, now quick, now slow, keeping time to a martial air. Evidently there was a rollicking fellow outside. No one moved. We sat there, all five of us, eyes wide open in surprise, trying to guess who this could be playing tunes on the door, and never seeking to solve the simple problem by turning the knob.

It was Tim. There was a sudden oppressive silence. Then he entered, gravely bowing.

"Good evening, Mr. Warden," he said mockingly. "You have a delightful way here of greeting the stranger at your gate, closing your ears to his appeals and letting him break in.

And Miss Warden too—why, this is a surprise. I had supposed you'd be at a ball. And Mr. Weston—delighted—I'm sure——"

"What, Mark?" There was genuine surprise in Tim's voice as he saw me sitting quietly in the shadow. His mock elegance disappeared, and he stood gaping at me. "I thought you'd gone to see Mr. Weston," he blurted out.

"He came to see me instead," said Mary laughing. "And so did Mr. Weston and Mr. Thomas, and so I hope you did. And if you sit down there by Uncle Luther and be quiet, you shall hear about the famine in India."

Tim just filled the settee. In my dark corner, in my comfortable chair, I could smile to myself as I watched his plight and that of his companions. I could not see Mary well, for the lamp and the long table separated us, but I fancied that in her retreat she, too, was laughing. Poor Tim had the end of the bench. He sat very erect, with his head up, his eyes on the wall before him, his folded hands resting on his knees, after the company manner of Black Log. Mr. Perry Thomas, at the other end, was his counterpart,

only the orator drew his chin into his collar, furrowed his brow, and gazed wisely at the floor. He was where Mary could see him!

Weston had none of our stiff, formal ways, but was making himself as much at home as possible in such trying circumstances. He spread out all over the narrow space allotted him between Luther and my brother. But curiously enough, he really seemed interested. It was he who told, in greatest detail, to Tim the story of Brother Matthias Pennel and of the trials of the saintly Flora Martin. When he had recounted her adventures to the very instant she caught the gleam of the tiger's eyes, he calmly swung one lank leg over the knee of the other, slid down in his seat so he could hook his head on the hard back, and said, cheerily, "Now, Mr. Warden, go on reading and let no one interrupt."

Perry was coughing feebly, as he always does when he is plotting to speak.

"No, no," cried Weston in protest; "I insist, Mr. Thomas, that you stay and play the violin to us when we have heard the end of this interesting story."

It was with mingled feelings that I regarded Brother Matthias Pennel. As I had stood on the tavern porch that night, looking up the white road that led to Mary's home, I had dared to picture to myself a different scene from the one before me. From that scene Luther Warden had been removed entirely. Of Robert Weston, of Perry Thomas, of Tim, I had taken no account. They had not even been dreamed of, for Mary and I were to sit alone in the quiet of the evening. The flash of her eyes was to be for me—for me their softer glowing. At my calling the rich flames would blaze on her cheeks. I was to light those flames. I was to fan them this way and that way. I was to smother them, kindle them, quench them. Playing with the fire of a woman's face! Dangerous work, that! And up the white road I had hobbled to the fire, as a simple child crawls to it. But Luther Warden was there to guard me with Brother Matthias Pennel, and in my inmost heart I hated them both for it. Then Perry Thomas blundered in, and compared to him, old Luther and his learned brother were endurable. As to Robert

Weston, I knew that beside him Matthias Pennel was my dearest friend. Then Tim came! and as I looked at the long settee where Luther was droning on and on through the story of Sister Flora, where Perry Thomas seemed to sit beneath the judgment seat, where Weston shifted wearily to and fro, where Tim was suffering the tortures of the thumb-screw, I cried to my inmost self, "Verily, Brother Matthias, thou art a mighty joker!"

It took a long time to kill that tiger. There was so much recalling to be done, so much remembering needed, and reviewing of statistics concerning the flora and the fauna of the far East, that when at last the rifle's cry rang out on the still night air, which, as we had learned, in India carries sound to a much greater distance than in our cold, Northern climes; when the mighty Bengal reeled and fell dying, and Sister Flora sprang from her hiding place on the roof to sing a hymn of praise; when all this had been told, Luther Warden banged the book shut, arose, and looked at the clock.

THE THIER STORY.

"Mighty souls!" he cried. "It's long past bed-time. It's half-past nine."

Back over the white road we went, Weston and Perry, Tim and I.

"Good-night, boys!" called the strange man cheerily from the gloom of the tavern porch.

It was the first word he had spoken on our walk home.

"Is it two million five hundred and sixty thousand, or two hundred and fifty-six thousand persons that are bitten annually by snakes in India?" cried Tim, suddenly awaking from his moody silence.

"You can go back to-morrow and find out," came from the porch.

"Good-night, Mr. Weston," returned my brother sharply.

Perry Thomas parted from us at the gate, and we stood watching his retreating figure till we lost it at the bend. Then we went in.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, with a lighted candle in his hand, Tim turned suddenly to me and said, "I thought you were going to see Weston."

"I thought you were sitting at home waiting for me to get back," I retorted.

"Can I help you upstairs?" he said.

"No, I'm going to sit awhile and smoke," I answered jauntily, "and talk—to Captain."

VII

TIM was leaving the valley. We tied his tin trunk on the back of the buggy and he climbed to the seat beside me. Tip Pulsifer handed him a great cylindrical parcel, bound in a newspaper, and my brother held it reverently in his lap; for it was a chocolate cake, six layers high, that Mrs. Tip had baked from the scanty contents of the Pulsifer flour barrel. Tim was going to the city, and all the city people Mrs. Tip had ever seen were lean, quick-moving and nervous, a condition which she concluded was induced by starvation. So she had done her best to provide Tim against want. Her mind was the mind of Six Stars. All the village was about the buggy. Josiah Nummler had rowed down from his hill-top, and the bulge in Tim's pocket was caused by the half dozen fine pippins which the old man had brought as his farewell gift. Even Theophilus Jones left the store unguarded,

and hurried over when the moment arrived that the village was to see the last of its favorite son. Mrs. Tip Pulsifer is always red about the eyes, and no way was left her to show her emotion but to toss her apron convulsively over her face and swing Cevery wildly to and fro, so that the infant's cries arose above the chorus of "good-bys" as we drove away.

"Farewell, comrade." We heard Aaron Kallaberger's stentorian tones as we clattered around the bend. "Head up—eyes front—for'a'd!"

Tim turned and waved his hat to the little company at the gate, to all the friends he had ever known, to the best he ever was to know; to Mrs. Bolum and her Isaac, feebly waving the hands that had so often helped him in time of boyish trouble; to Nanny Pulsifer and Tip; to all the worthies of the store.

Tim was off to war. He was going to take part in a greater battle than I had ever seen, for I had been one of thousands who had marched together on a common enemy. He was going forth as did Launcelot and Galahad, alone, to

meet his enemies at every turn, to be sore pressed, and bruised and wounded; not to be as I was, a part of a machine, but to be the machine and the god in it, too. How I envied him! He was going forth to encounter many strange adventures, and while he was in the press, laying about him in all the glory of his strength, fighting his way against a mob, to fame and fortune, I should be dozing life away with Captain.

"Did it feel that way when you left?" said Tim. He spoke for the first time when we passed the tannery lane, and his voice was a wee bit husky.

"I suppose it's the same with everybody when they turn the bend," I answered.

"That's it exactly—at the turn in the road—when you can't see home any more—when you'd give all the world to turn back, but dare not." Tim had faced about and was looking over the valley as we climbed the long slope of the ridge. "It's just like being torn in two, isn't it?" he said.

"Naturally," said I. "Home and home people are as much a part of you as head and limbs.

When I dragged you away, binding you here in the buggy with your tin trunk and your ambition, something had to snap."

"And it snapped at the bend," Tim said grimly; "when I saw the last of the house and the rambo tree at the end of the orchard."

My brother took to whistling. He started away bravely with a rollicking air, keeping time to the creaking of the buggy and the slow crunching of the horse's feet on the gravel road. Even that failed him. We were at the crest of the hill; we were turning another bend; we were in the woods, and through the trees he had a last look at Black Log. And it's such a little valley, too, that it would hardly seem worth looking back on when the rich fields of Kishikoquillas roll away before one! The lone pine on the stone cap of Gander Knob waved its farewell, and we clattered down the long slope into the great world.

"It's all over at last," said Tim, smiling, "and now I am glad I've come; for Black Log is a good place, but it's so little, after all."

"I'm afraid you will find it bigger than a desk

HE HAD A LAST LOOK AT BLACK LOG.

in Weston's office, and a tiny room on a cramped city street," said I.

My brother recovered his old spirit and refused to be discouraged by my pessimistic view of his expedition. He laughed gayly and pointed across the country where half a dozen spires of smoke were rising. There was the railroad. There was the great highway where his real journey was to start. There was the beginning of his great adventure. I was the last outpost of the friendly land, and he was going into the unknown. There we were to part! It was my turn to whistle and to watch the wheels as, mile by mile, they measured off the road to that last bend, where I should see no more of Tim.

. . . . . .

There was something strange in my brother's resolve to leave Six Stars and try his fortunes in the city. Just as I had settled down to the old easy ways which my absence had made doubly dear to me, when we should have been drawn closer to each other than ever, and my dependence on him was greatest, he announced his

purpose. It was only yesterday. I returned from my accustomed afternoon visit to the Wardens to find him rummaging the house for a few of his more personal belongings and stowing them away in a small, blue tin trunk that a little while before had adorned the counter in the store.

"I am going to New York," he said, not giving me time to inquire into his strange proceeding.

I laughed. Tim was joking. This was some odd prank. He had borrowed the tin trunk and was giving me a travesty on Tip Pulsifer fleeing over the mountain from his petulant spouse: for last night Tim and I had had a little tiff. For the first time I had forgotten the post-prandial pipe, and undismayed by the horrors of the famine in India or the tribulations of Sister Flora Martin, journeyed up the road to sit at Mary's side.

"Over the mountain, eh, Tim?" I laughed. "And is Tip going?"

My brother caught my meaning, but he did not smile.

"Honest," he said. "I am going to New York."

"To New York!" I cried. My crutches clattered to the floor as I sank into my chair.

"Yes," said Tim, speaking so quietly that I knew it was the truth. "Mr. Weston has given me a position in his store. It's a tea importing concern, and he owns it, though he doesn't spend much time at his business."

"I didn't think you'd leave me alone." The words were hardly spoken till I regretted them. I had spoken in spite of my better self, for what right had I to stand between my brother and a broader life? When I had gone away to see the world, he had plodded on patiently in the narrow valley to keep a home for me. Now that I was back, it was justly his turn to go beyond the mountains and learn something more than the dull routine of the farm and the sleepy village.

"I hate to leave you, Mark," he said. "But you have felt as I feel about getting away and seeing something. Still, if you really want me to stay, I'll give it up. But you are a good deal to blame. You have told me of what you saw

when you were in the army. You have showed me that there are bigger things in this world than plodding after a plough, and more exciting chases than those after foxes. I want to do more than sit on a nail-keg in the store and discuss big events. I want to have a little part in them myself—you understand."

"Yes, Tim," said I, "you are right, and I'll get along first rate."

"That's the way to talk," he cried cheerfully, slapping me on the shoulder. "You won't be half as lonely here as I shall down there in a strange city; and when you clean away the supper dishes and light your pipe and think of me, I'll be lighting mine and thinking of you and——" He stopped. Captain had trotted in, and was sitting close by, looking first at one and then at the other of us quizzically. "You'll have Captain," added Tim, laughing, "and then by and by, when I am making money, you and Captain will come down to the city and we'll all smoke our pipes together—eh, Captain?"

The hound leaped up and Tim caught his forepaws and the two went dancing around the room

until a long-drawn howl warned us that such bipedic capers were not to the dog's liking.

"Captain isn't going to leave home, Tim," I cried. "You mustn't expect him to take so active a part in your demonstrations of joy."

"It wasn't the delight of leaving home made me dance," returned the boy. "It was the contemplation of the time we'll have when we get together again."

"Then why go away at all?"

"There you are. A minute ago you agreed with me; you were right with me in my plan to do something in this world. Now you are using your cunning arguments to dissuade me. But you can't stop me, Mark. I've accepted the place. Mr. Weston has sent word that I am coming, and there you are. I must keep to my bargain."

"When did Weston arrange all this for you?"

"This morning. We were on Blue Gum Ridge hunting squirrels, and we got to talking over one thing and another. I guess I kind of opened up—for he's a clever man, Mark. Why, he pumped me dry. We hadn't sat there on a log

very long till he knew the whole family history and about everything I had ever learned or

"HE PUMPED ME DRY."

thought of. He asked me if I intended to spend all my life here, and I said it looked that way, and then I told him how I wanted to go and do something and be somebody."

Tim stopped suddenly, and winked at Cap-

tain. "I told him I wanted to go away and see something as you had done, for I was weary of listening to your accounts of things you'd seen. It's awful to have to listen to another's travels. It must be fine to tell about your own."

"Well, is it my talking that's driving you away, or is it Weston's alluring offers?"

"Alluring?" Tim laughed. "I'll say for Weston, he is frank. He told me that to his mind business was worse than death. He was born to it. His father left it to him and he has to keep it going to live; but he lets his partner look after it mostly, and he is always worrying lest his partner should die and leave him with the whole thing on his hands. He told me I'd have to drudge in a dark office over books for ten hours a day, and that it would be years before I began to see any rewards. By that time I would probably decide that the old-fashioned scheme of having kings born to order was more sensible than making men wear their lives out trying to become rulers. A cow was contented, he said, because it was satisfied to stand under a tree and breathe the free air, and look up into the blue skies and over the green fields, and chew

the cud. As long as the cow was satisfied with one cud it would be contented; but once the idea got abroad in the pasture that two cuds were required for a respectable cow, peace and happiness were gone forever."

"Our lanky stranger seems a wise man," said I. "In the face of all that, what did you say?"

"I told him I wasn't a cow," Tim answered.

There was no controverting such a reply, and though my sympathies were with the pessimistic Weston, I dared not raise my voice in defence of his logic as against this young brother. Tim seemed to think that the fact that he was not a cow turned from him all the force of Weston's philosophy, and insisted on going blindly on in search of another cud.

"He laughed when I said that," Tim continued, "and he said he guessed there was no sense in using figures of speech to me, but he was willing to bet that some time I would come to his way of thinking. I told him that perhaps I would when I had seen as much of men and things as he had; but now I looked about me with the mind and the eye of a yokel. That was

just what I wanted to escape. He was himself talking to me from a vantage-point of superior knowledge, and the consciousness of my own inferiority was one of the main things to spur me on."

"At that he gave you up?" said I.

"He gave me up," Tim answered; "and after all, Mark, old Weston is a fine fellow. He said that there was just one thing for me to do, and that was to see and learn for myself. So he wrote to his partner to-day, and I go in the morning."

"But must you go on a day's notice?"

"The quicker the better, Mark; and you see I haven't been letting any grass grow under my feet. When Weston and I reached our conclusion, I went to the store and got the trunk. In the interval of packing, I've gone over to Pulsifer's and arranged for Tip to work regularly for you this winter, looking after the farm. He wanted to go up to Snyder County and dig for gold. He knows where there's gold in Snyder County and you may have trouble there; but when you see any signs of a break you are to

tell Mrs. Tip. She says she'll head him off all right. Nanny Pulsifer, by the way, will come every day and straighten up the house. I saw Mrs. Bolum, and she said she would keep an eye on Nanny Pulsifer, for Nanny is likely to get one of her religious spells and quit work. When you hear her singing hymns around the house, you are to tell Mrs. Bolum."

"NANNY IS LIKELY TO GET ONE OF HER RELIGIOUS SPELLS AND QUIT WORK."

"Who will look after Mrs. Bolum? To whom must I appeal when I see signs there?"

"When Mrs. Bolum fails you, Mark, write to me," Tim answered. "When you see signs of her neglecting you, drop me a line and I'll be home in three days."

"I may have to appeal to you to save me from my friends," I said, "if Tip Pulsifer goes dig-

ging gold and Nanny Pulsifer gets religion and old Mrs. Bolum belies her nature and forgets me. But anyway, if Captain and I sit here at night knee-deep in dust and cobwebs, at least we can swell our chests and talk about our brother in the city, who is making—how much?"

"Seven dollars a week!" cried Tim. "Think of it, Mark, seven dollars a week. That's more than you made as a soldier."

. . . . . .

"We are near the last bend, Tim. Yes—I'll say good-by to Mary for you. I'll tell her that in the hurry you forgot her. And she will believe me! Why didn't you go up the hill last night, instead of sneaking off this way?—for you know you didn't forget her. That last smoke—that's right—you and Captain and I, and our pipes. I fear she did pass from our minds, but we had many things to talk over in those last hours. I promise you I will go up to-night and explain. Tell Weston about that fox on Gander Knob—of course I shall. School starts to-morrow, else I'd be after him myself; but on Saturday we'll hie to the mountain, Weston and

Captain and I. You, Tim, shall have the skin, a memento of the valley. I'll say good-by to Captain again, and I'll keep the guns oiled, and Piney Carter shall have the rifle whenever he wants it—provided he cleans it every hunting night. And I'll tell old Mrs. Bolum—but the train is going to start. Are you sure you have your ticket, and your check, and your lunch? Yes, I'll say good-by to Mary for you.—Good-by, Tim!"

And Tim went around the bend.

VIII

BOOKS! Books! Eternal, infernal books! The sun was printing over the floor the shadow skeleton of the juniper-tree by the westerly window. That always told me it was one o'clock. And one o'clock meant books again —three long hours of wrangling with dull wits, of fencing with sharper ones; three long hours of a-b-abs, of two-times-twos and three-times-threes; hours of spelling and of parsing, hours of bounding and describing. With it all, woven through it, now swelling, now dying away, now broken by a shrill cry of pain or anger, was the ceaseless buzzing of the school. There was no rest for the eye, even. The walls were white, their glare was baneful, and through the chalk-dust mist the rustling field of young heads suggested anything but peace and repose to one of my calling. That was the field I worked in.

I had been with Tim. His letter from New

York was in my hands, and over and over I had read it, until I knew every twist in the writing. In the reading I had been carried away from myself, and seemed to be beside him in his battle in the world, laying about with him right lustily. Then by force of habit I had looked up and had seen the shadow of the juniper-tree. I was back in my prison. And it was books!

"Brace up there, Daniel Arker, and quit your blubbering!" I cried.

Daniel was a snuffler. Whenever I had a companion in the schoolhouse at the noon recess, it was generally this lad, and when he was there he was nursing a wound and snuffling. If there was any trouble to be got into, if there was a flying ball to come in contact with, ice to break through or a limb to snap, Daniel never failed to be on hand. Then he would burst rudely into my solitude and while I sopped cold water over his injured members, he would blubber. When I turned from him to my own corner by the window, the blubber would die away into a snuffle, and there he would sit, his head buried in his hands, snuffling and snuffling until books.

Now I spoke sharply to the boy. He raised his head and fixed one red eye on me, for the other was hidden by his hand.

I WAS BACK IN MY PRISON.

"I guesst you was never hit on the eye by a ball, was ye?" he stuttered.

"I guess I have been," was my reply. "I was a good round-town player, and you never saw me crying like that, either."

"I was playin' sock-ball," snuffled the boy, and

a solitary tear rolled down his snub nose. He flicked it away with his right hand, and this act disclosed to me a great bluish swelling, from under which a bit of eye was twinkling mournfully at me. The boy was hurt; my heart went out to him, for the memory of my own sock-ball and tickley-bender days came back to me.

"Come, come," I said more kindly, laying a hand on the black head. "Brace up, Daniel, for I must call the others in, and you don't want them to see you crying. Dare to be like the great Daniel, who wasn't even afraid of the wild beasts."

"But Dan'el in the Lion's Den never played sock-ball," whimpered the boy, covering each eye with a chubby fist as he rubbed away the traces of his tears.

Beware, Daniel Arker! Form not in my mind such a picture as that of the mighty prophet in his robes being "it." Over the mantel in our parlor we have a picture of the lion's den, and it is one of the choicest of our family treasures. Whence it came, we do not know. Even my mother, familiar as she was with the minutest

detail of our family history as far back as my grandfather's time, could not tell me that; but we always believed it to be one of the world's great pictures that by some strange chance had come into our possession. How well I remember my keen disappointment on learning that it was not a photograph. It took years to convince Tim of that, and we consoled ourselves that at least it had been drawn by one who was there. Else how could he have done it so accurately? For the likeness of Daniel was splendid. The great prophet of Babylon must have looked just like that. He must have sat on a boulder in the middle of the rocky chamber, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, one hand resting languidly on the head of a mighty lion, a sandalled foot using another hoary mane as a footstool. There were lions all around him, and how they loved him! You could see it in their eyes. Tip Pulsifer once told me that Daniel had them charmed, and that he was looking so intently at the ceiling because he was repeating over and over again the mystic words—probably Dutch —that his grandfather had taught him. One

slip—and I should see the fiery flash return to the eyes of the beasts! One slip—and they would be upon him! To Tip I replied that this was preposterous, as Babylon lived before there was any Dutch, and there being no Dutch, how could there be effective charms? Daniel was saved by a miracle. But Tip is slow-witted. Charms were originally called miracles, he said. The miracle was the father of the charm. Folks would say there were no charms to-day, yet they would believe in charms that were worked a few thousand years ago, only they called them miracles. It was useless to argue with a thick fellow like Tip. I had always preferred to think of Daniel stilling the wild beasts by the grandeur of his soul, and the suggestion that I drag him from his throne, king of men and king of beasts, and picture him playing sock-ball, doing a double shuffle with his sandalled feet, tossing his long robe wildly about, now leaping, now dodging, to avoid the flying sphere—it was too much. It angered me.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Daniel Arker!" I cried. "The idea of a boy that comes

of good church folks like yours talking that way about one of the prophets! I'll dally with you no more. The boys shall see you as you are. It's books!"

I threw the window open and shouted, "Books!" I pounded on the ledge with my ruler and shouted, "Books!"

For a minute the boys feigned not to see me, and played the harder, trying to drown my cries in their yells to the runners on the bases. But the girls took up my call and came trooping schoolward. The little boys began to break away, and soon the school resounded with the shuffle of feet, the clatter of empty dinner pails, and the banging of desk tops.

"It's books, William; hurry," I cried to the last laggard.

I knew this boy well. He was the biggest in the school, and to hold his position among his fellows he had to defy me. As long as I watched him, he must lag. The louder I called, the deafer he must seem to be. His post was hemmed around by tradition. It was his by divine right, and it involved on its holder duties

sometimes onerous, often dangerous; but for him to abate one iota of his privileges would be a reflection on his predecessors, an injustice to his heirs. It would mean scholastic revolution. He knew that I must yell at him. My position also was hemmed about by tradition. To appear not to fear the biggest boy was one of the chief duties of a successful pedagogue. We understood each other. So I yelled once more and closed the window. The moment my back was turned he ran for the door.

"It is," Daniel Arker was shouting.

"It ain't," Samuel Carter retorted, sticking out his tongue.

"Boys, be quiet!" I commanded.

"He said his eye was swole worse 'an mine oncet," cried Daniel.

His good eye was blazing, his shoulders were squared back, and his fists were clenched. There was no sign of a snuffle about him now. Heaven, but he looked fine! All this time I had wronged Daniel. I had only known him as he crawled to me broken and bruised after the conflict. I had never known the odds he had encountered, for

when I questioned him he just snuffled. Now I saw him before the battle, ready to defend his honor against a lad of more than his years and size, and the wickedest fighter in the school. I believed that had I let him loose there he would have whipped. But one in my position is hemmed in by tradition, so in my private capacity I was patting the boy's head with the same motion that I used in my public capacity to push him into his seat, while with a crutch I made a feint at Samuel that sent him scurrying to his place.

The biggest boy in the school sauntered in. He carefully upset three dinner pails from the shelves in the rear as he hung up his hat. I reprimanded him most severely, but I finished my lecture before he had replaced the cans. Then he shuffled to his place and got out a book as a sign that school might begin.

Now, I always liked that biggest boy. He knew his position so well. He knew just how far it was proper for him to go, and never once did he overstep those bounds. He held the respect and fear of his juniors without making any

open breach with the teacher. But in one way William Bellus had been peculiarly favored. His predecessors had to deal with Perry Thomas, and in spite of his gentle ways and intellectual cast, Perry is active and wiry. He is a blacksmith by trade, and is the leading tenor in the Methodist choir. This makes a combination that for staying powers has few equals. My biggest boy's predecessor had been utterly broken. Even the girls jeered at him until he quit school entirely. But William had another problem. It was the disappointment of his life that Perry Thomas retired just as he came into power. He had declared at a mass-meeting behind the woodshed that it was a gross injustice on the part of the directors to put a crippled teacher in charge of the school. Where now was glory to be gained? They would have a schoolma'am next, like they done up to Popolomus, and none but little boys, and girls not yet out of plaits, would be so servile as to suffer such domination. Mark Hope, the soldier, he honored! Mark Hope, the veteran, he revered! Mark Hope, the teacher, he despised; for his crutches

made him a safe barricade against which no Biggest Boy with a spark of honor would dare to hurl himself. There might be in the school boys base enough to charge that he lacked spirit in his attitude of armed neutrality. Let those traducers step forward, whether they be two or a dozen. What would follow, the Biggest Boy did not say; but he had pulled off his coat, and there was none to dispute him. His position was established. Thereafter he assumed toward me a calm indifference. He was never openly offensive. He always kept within certain carefully laid bounds of supercilious politeness. At first he was exasperating, and I longed to have him forget himself and overstep those bounds, that I might make up for his disappointment in being cheated out of Perry Thomas. But he never did.

To-day William Bellus really opened the school, for not till he had buried his face in his book did the general buzz begin.

That buzz was maddening. For three long hours I had to sit there and listen to the children as they droned over and over their lessons. Yet

this was my life's work. To my care Six Stars had intrusted her young, and I should be proud of that trust and earnest in its fulfilment. But Tim's letter was in my pocket. It was full of the big things of this life. It told of great struggles for great prizes, and the chalk dust choked me when I thought of him, and then turned to myself as I stood there, trying to demonstrate to half a dozen girls and boys that the total sum of a single column of six figures was twenty-four. Tim had been promoted and was a full-fledged clerk now. There were many steps ahead for him, but he was going to climb them rung by rung; and what joy there is in drawing one's self up by one's own strength! I was at the top of my ladder—at the very pinnacle of learning in Black Log. Even now I was unfolding to the marvelling eyes of the children of the valley the mysteries of that great science, physical geography. I was explaining to them the trend of the Rockies and the Himalayas, and of other mountains I should never see; I was telling them why it snowed, and unfolding the phenomena of the aurora borealis. Alexander with no more

worlds to conquer was a sorry spectacle. We pedagogues who have mastered physical geography are Alexanders. But if I was bound to the pinnacle of learning so that I could neither fly nor fall, I could at least watch Tim as he struggled higher and higher. And Mary was watching with me! That was what made my work that day seem doubly irksome and the hours trebly long; for she was waiting to hear from him, and when the sun seemed to rest on the mill gable I should be free to go to her. So the minutes dragged. It made me angry. Ordinarily I speak quietly to the scholars, but now I fairly bellowed at Chester Holmes, who was reading in such a loud tone that he disturbed me and called me to the real business of the moment.

"Don't say Dooglas!" I cried.

"That's the way Teacher Thomas used to say it," retorted Chester, sitting down on the long bench where the Fifth Reader class was posted.

"D-o-u-g — dug — Douglas," I snapped. "'Douglas round him drew his cloak.' Now, Ira Snarkle, you may read five lines, beginning with the second stanza."

Ira was very tall for his sixteen years. His clothes had never caught up to him, for his trousers always failed by two inches to grasp his shoe-tops, and his coat had a terrible struggle to touch the top of his trousers. For the shortness of the sleeves he partly compensated with a pair of bright red worsted wristers. When he bent his elbows the sleeves flew up his arms, and these wristers became the most conspicuous thing in his whole attire.

Ira was holding his book in the correct position now, so I saw a length of bare arms embraced at the wrists by brilliant bands of red.

" 'My manors, halls, and bowers shall still be open at my soveryne's will,' " chanted the boy.

He paused, and to illustrate the imperious humor of the Scot, he waved his fingers and a red wrister at me. The gesture unnerved him for a moment, and he had to go thumbing over the page to find his place. He caught it again and chanted on—" 'At my sover-sover-yne's will. To each one whom he lists, however unmeet to be the owner's peer.' "

Again the boy waved the fingers and the red

wrister at me. Again he paused, gathering himself for the climax. That gesture was abominable, but at such a time I dared not interrupt.

"'My castles are my king's alone from turret to foundation stone,'" he cried. The red wrister flashed beneath my eye. Ira had even forgotten his book and let it fall to his side. He took a step forward; paused with one knee bent and the other stiff; extended his right arm and shouted, "'The hand of Dooglas is his own, and never shall in friendly grasp the hand of sech as Marmyyon clasp.'"

"'AT MY SOVER-SOVER-YNE'S WILL.'"

Well done, Ira! The proud Marmion must indeed have trembled until his armor rattled if the Scot bellowed at him in that way and shook

a red wrister so violently under his very nose. Excellent, Ira; you put spirit in your reading. One can almost picture you beneath Tantallion's towers, drawing your cloak around you and giving cold respect to the stranger guest. But why say "Dooglas"?

"S-o-u-p spells soup," answered Ira loftily to my question. "Then D-o-u-g must spell doog."

"I tell you it's Douglas. 'The hand of Douglas is his own,'" I cried. At the mention of the doughty Scot I pounded the floor with my crutch and repeated "Dug—dug—dug."

"But Teacher Thomas allus said Doog," exclaimed Chester Holmes.

"I don't care what Teacher Thomas said," I retorted. "You must say Dug—Dug—Douglas."

"But Teacher Thomas is the best speaker they is," piped in Lulu Ann Nummler from the end of the bench.

"I don't care if Teacher Thomas can recite better than Demosthenes himself," I snapped. "In this school we say Douglas." My crutch emphasized this mandate, but I could not see how

it was received, for every scholar's face was hidden from me by a book.

"Now, Abraham, six lines."

Abraham Lincoln Spiker was two years younger than Ira Snarkle, but he seemed much taller and correspondingly thinner. In our valley the boys have a fashion of being born long, and getting shorter and fatter as they grow older. Abraham's mother in making his clothes had provided against the day when he would weigh two hundred pounds, and consequently his garments hung all around him, giving him an exceedingly dispirited look. His hair relieved this somewhat, for it was white and always stood gaily on end, defying brush and comb. Daniel Arker, a sturdy black-haired lad, would have done fuller justice to the passage that fell to Abraham, for the Spiker boy with his gentle lisp never shone in elocution; but our reading class is a lottery, as we go from scholar to scholar down the line. The lot falling to him, Abraham pushed himself up from the bench, grasped his book fiercely with both hands, and fixed his eyes intently on the ceiling.

"Go on," I commanded kindly.

" 'Fierth broke he forth,' " lisped the boy.

"Louder. Put some spirit in it," I cried. " 'Fierce broke he forth!' " And my crutch beat the floor.

" 'Fierth broke he forth, and durtht thou then to bared——"

"To beard," I corrected.

" 'Bared the lion in hith den—the Doog-dug-lath——' " Abraham stopped and took a long breath. I just gazed at him.

" 'In hith hall,' " he shouted. " 'And h-o-p-hop-e-s-t-hopest thou then unthscathed to go?' "

The boy's knees began to bend under him, and he was reaching a long, thin arm out behind hunting for the bench. He was fleeing. I knew it. I warned him.

"No—go on—read on."

Abraham sighed and drew his sleeve across his mouth from the elbow to the tips of his fingers. Then he sang:

" 'Noby—Thent Bride—ofBoth—wellno—up-draw — bridgegrooms — whatward — erho — lettheportculluthfall!' "

Young Spiker collapsed.

"'Lord Marmion turned; well was his need,'" I cried, "if Douglas ever addressed him in that fashion."

"Now watch me, boys," I added. And with as much fire as I could kindle in so short a time and under conditions so dampening, I thundered the resounding lines: "'No, by St. Bride of Bothwell, no! Up drawbridge, grooms—what, warder, ho!'"

"'Let the portcullis fall!'" This last command rang from the back of the room. Perry Thomas stood there smiling.

"I couldn't have done it better myself, Mark," he said. "It's a splendid piece—that Marmyyon—ain't it—grand—noble. I love to say it."

"Teacher Thomas, Teacher Thomas," came in the shrill voice of Chester Holmes, "ain't it Dooglas?"

Perry was at my side, smiling benignly on the school. He really seemed to love the scholars; but Perry is a pious man, and seeks to follow the letter of the Scriptures, and the command is to love our enemies.

"Doogulus—Doogulus," he said. "Of course, boys, it's Doogulus."

The word seemed to taste good, he rolled it over and over so in his mouth.

"Teacher Hope says you ain't such a fine speaker after all," cried Lulu Ann Nummler from the distant end of the bench.

She is fifteen and should have known better, but the people of our valley are dreadfully frank sometimes, and this girl spoke in the clear, sharp voice of truth that cut through one. Perry turned quick as a flash and eyed me.

For a moment all I could do was to thump the floor and cry "Order! Silence! Lulu Ann Nummler, when you want to speak, you must hold up three fingers."

The three fingers shot up at once and waved at me, but I pretended not to see them and turned to my guest.

"I said, Perry, that you were not quite so great a speaker as Demosthenes," I stammered. Chester Holmes had three fingers up and Ira Snarkle was waving both hands, but I went calmly on: "They were telling me how beauti-

fully you recited, and I was trying to instil into the piece a little of your spirit. But now that we have you here, I insist on your showing me and the school just how it is done."

Perry frowned fiercely on Lulu Ann Nummler, and the three fingers disappeared. On me he smiled.

"It's a great pleasure to me to be able to recite," he said. "To be able to repeat great po-ems at will, is to have a treasure you can allus carry with you while your voice lasts." All this was to the scholars. "There are three great arts in this world—singin', hand-paintin', and last but not least, speakin'. I try my hand at all of them except hand-paintin', and I wish to impress on all you scholars what a joy it is to oneself and one's friends to have mastered one of these muses. Singin' and speakin' are closely allied, startin' from the same source. And hand-paintin', it allus seemed to me, is really elocution in oils; for a be-yutiful picture is a silent talker. What suggestions it brings to us as we look upon a paintin' of a wreath of flowers, or fruit, or a handsome lady! This art is

lastin'. Speakin' and singin' is over as soon as they is done. So I have often thought that had I only time I'd hand-paint; but bein' a busy man I've had to content myself with but two of the muses."

PERRY THOMAS STANDS CONFRONTING THE ENGLISH WARRIOR.

Perry paused a moment to rub his hands and smile. I did not miss this opportunity to break in, for I had no intention of listening to a dissertation on art as well as to a recitation.

"Now let us have your 'Marmion,'" I said.

He had forgotten all about "Marmion," and came back to the knight with a start and a cough. Then he gazed

long at the floor. The school buzz died away, and you could hear the ticking of my little clock. Perry coughed again and I knew that he was started, so I settled down in my chair and gazed out of the window.

"'But Doogulus round him drew his cloak,'" Perry was buttoning the two top buttons of his Prince Albert as his voice rang out. "'Folded his arms and thus he spoke.'"

Annagretta Holmes is only three years old. They send her to school to keep her warm and out of mischief. She sat on the very front row, right under Perry's eye. The poor child didn't understand why Teacher Thomas should stare so at her, and she let out one long, unending bleat. This gave me a chance to send Lulu Ann Nummler out of the room in charge of the infant, and I rested easier when Perry drew his Prince Albert around him once more and spoke.

A grand figure Perry would have made in Tantallion's towers. I forgot the school, and the village and the valley, as I sat there looking out of the window into the sky. I am in those towers when Marmion stops to bid adieu, but in

place of the proud Scottish noble, Perry Thomas stands confronting the English warrior. What a pair they make—the knight armed cap-a-pie, at his charger's side, and Perry in that close-fitting, shiny coat that has seen so many great occasions in the valley. There is a gracious bigness about the Englishman forgetting the cold respect with which he has been treated and offering a mailed hand in farewell. But Perry buttons his Prince Albert, waves his brown derby under the very vizor of the departing guest, rests easily on his right leg, bends the left knee slightly, folds his arms and speaks. "Burned Marmion's swarthy cheek like fire." Little wonder! If Perry Thomas spoke to me like that I'd cleave his head. But Marmion spares proud Angus. He beards the Doogulus in his hall. He dashes the rowels in his steed, dodges the portcullis, and gallops over the draw. And Perry Thomas is left standing with folded arms, gazing through the chalk-dust haze into the solemn, wide open eyes of the children of Six Stars.

IX

PERRY'S head was close to mine, over my table. The school was studying louder than ever, and our voices could not have gone beyond the platform; but my friend was cautious. The scholars might well have thought that the whispered conference boded them ill; that the new teacher and the old teacher were hatching some conspiracy against them. It must have looked like it. Perry's elbows were on the table, and my elbows were on the table. My chin rested in my hands, but his hands were waving beneath my chin as he unfolded to me the plot he had just discovered against his hopes and his happiness. But the school was good. The second grammar class had been relieved from a recitation by this confab, and somehow Perry had a subduing influence. Even the Biggest Boy opened his desk quietly and never once looked up from his geography except

for a cautious glance out of the corner of his left eye.

"There was a pile of 'em that high, Mark," said Perry, waving his hands about a foot above the table. "There was some books of po-ems and novels and such. He'd sent them all to her in one batch—all new, mind ye, too—and it pleased her most to death. Well, it made me feel flat, I tell you—so flat that when she asked me if I didn't think it was lovely of him, I burst right out and said it was really. What I should 'a' done was kind of pass it off as if it didn't amount to much."

"Who is the young woman?" I asked.

"I ain't mentionin' names," Perry replied, "and I ain't givin' the name of the other man; but I have an idee you could guess if you kep' at it."

Our valley does not bloom with beautiful young women. We always have a few, but those few can be counted on one's fingers. Our valley does not number among its men many who can supplement their sentimental attentions with gifts of books. I knew of one. So it did not

require much guessing on my part to divine the cause of Perry's heart-sickness; but as long as the other persons in his drama were anonymities, he would speak freely, so I relieved him by declaring solemnly that never in the world could I guess. I had always supposed him a lover of all women, a slave of none.

Perry smiled.

"I have kep' a good deal of company," he said. "On account of my fiddlin', and singin', and recitin' I've always had things pretty much my own way. It's opposition that's ruination. That's what shatters a man's heart and takes all his sperrit. As long as the game's between just a man and a girl there's nothin' very serious. One or the other loses, and you can begin a new game somewheres else. But when two men and one girl get a playin' three handed, then it is serious; then it's desperate. A man has to th'ow his whole heart and mind into it, if he'd whip, and he gets so worked up he thinks his whole happiness to the end of time depends on his drivin' the other fellow to drownin' himself in the mill-dam."

"In other words, if you had not found another laying piles of books and such gifts at the feet of this fair one, whose name I can never guess, you would have fiddled to her and sung to her and recited to her until she said 'I love you.' Then you would have sought new heavens to conquer."

"That's about it," said Perry, smiling feebly. His face brightened. "You know how it is yourself, Mark. Mind how you kep' company once with Emily Holmes and nothin' come of it. She went off to normal school in desperation—you mind that, don't ye?—and she married a schoolteacher from Snyder County—you mind that, don't ye? Now supposin' you and that Snyder County chap had been opposin' one another instead of you and Emily Holmes—I allow her name would have been changed to Emily Hope long ago, or you'd 'a' drownded yourself."

"But I never had any intention of marrying Emily Holmes," I protested.

"I know you didn't," Perry replied, thumping the table in triumph. "That's just the pint. If the world was popilated by one man and one

woman, they'd be a bachelor and an old maid. If there was two men and one woman, then one of the men would marry the old maid sure."

"Your meaning is more clear," I said.

Though Perry did not know it, I was meeting the same opposition that so aroused his ire. In part there was truth in what he said, for while opposition does not increase one's love, it surely quickens it. I doubt if I should have been making a journey nightly up the hill if I had not expected to find Weston there. Of Perry I had no fear, and it was not egotism in me to be indifferent to him. He lives so far down the valley. It's a long walk from Buzzards Glory to Six Stars, and the road has many chuck-holes. Perry is our man-about-the-valley *par excellence*, but he is discreet, so it had chanced we met but once at Warden's, and that was on the night when we heard the story of Flora Martin and the famine in India. He knew me still as a friend, and not regarding him as a rival, I treated him as a companion in arms. To be sure, I could not see where he could be of much assistance; but we had a common aim and a common foe. That

made a bond between us. With that common foe disposed of, the bond might snap. Till then I was Perry's friend.

"I agree with you partly," I said. "Still, it seems to me a man should love a woman for herself—wholly, entirely for herself, and not because some other fellow has set his heart on her."

"You are right there, in part," Perry answered. "I have set my heart on a particular young lady, but the fact that another—a lean, cadaverous fellow with red whiskers and no particular looks or brains—is slowly pushing himself between us makes it worse. It aggravates me; it affects my appetite." Perry smiled grimly. "It drives away sleep. You know how it 'ud have been if that Snyder County teacher had been livin' in Six Stars when you was keepin' company with Emily Holmes."

"I don't know how it would have been at all," I retorted hotly.

"Well, s'posin' when you'd walked four miles to set up with her, and thought you had her all to yourself, s'pose this Snyder County teacher with red whiskers, and little twinklin' eyes, and

new clothes, come strollin' in, and stretched out in a chair like he owned her, and begin tellin' about all the countries he'd seen—about England and Rome, Injy and Africa—and she leaned for'a'd and looked up into his eyes and just listened to him talk, drank it all in like—s'pose all that, and then s'pose——"

"I'll suppose anything you like," said I, "except that I am in love with Emily Holmes and that the Snyder County teacher is cutting me out. For example, let us put me in your place. I am enamored of this fair unknown—of course I can't guess her name—and this second man, also unknown—he of the red whiskers, is my rival. Let us suppose it that way."

"If you insist," Perry replied. "Well then, you are settin' up with her. You've invited her to be your lady at the next spellin' bee between Six Stars and Turkey Walley, and she has said she'll think about it. Then you've told her that there is something wrong with you. You don't know what it is, 'ceptin' you feel all peekit like for no special reason; you can't eat no more, and sleep poorly and has sighin' spells. Then

she kind of peeks at you outen the corner of her eye and smiles. S'posin' just then in comes this man and bows most polite, and tells you he is so delighted to see you, and makes her move from the settee where you are, to a rocker close to him; and leans over her and asks about the health of all the family as if they was his nearest and dearest; inquires about her dog; tells her she looks just like the portrates of his great-grandma. S'posin' she just kind of looks at the floor quiet-like or else up to him—you'll begin to think you ain't there at all, won't you? Then you'll concide that you are there but you oughtn't to be, and kind of slide out without your hat and forget your fiddle. I tell you, Mark, it's then love becomes a consúmin' fire."

Perry looked at me appealingly. Men hesitate to speak of love—except to women. He had already shown a frankness that was surprising, but then with a certain deftness he had placed me in the position of the sentimental one with a problem to solve. He was seeking for himself a solution of that problem, and was appealing to me to help him.

"YOU'LL BEGIN TO THINK YOU AIN'T THERE AT ALL."

"Suppose again," said I, "that going another day to see the girl, I found her poring over a pile of books—all new books—just given her by this same arrogant interloper." Perry was silent, but when I paused and looked at him, I saw in his face that I was arguing along the right line. "Then the question arises, what shall I do?"

Perry nodded.

"What would you do?" he said. "That's it exact."

"I'd meet him at his own game," I answered.

"With what?" he asked.

"With what?" I repeated.

There was the rub! With what? I sat with my head clasped between my hands trying to answer him.

"With what?" I repeated, after a long silence.

"S'posin' I got her a wreath." Perry offered the suggestion, and in his enthusiasm he forgot that in our premise I was the person concerned; but I was not loath to let him take on himself the burden of our perplexity.

"Is she dead?" I asked.

"I needn't get one of that kind," he solemnly replied. "Somethin' in autumn leaves ought to be nice."

"You might do better."

"A hand-paintin', then," he ventured timidly.

I smiled on this with more approval.

"They have some be-yutiful ones at Hopedale," he said with more heart. "The last time I was down I was lookin' at 'em. They've fine gold frames and——"

"Why send her a picture of a tree when the finest oak in the valley is at her door?" I protested. "Why send her a picture of a slate-colored cow when a herd of Durhams pastures every day right under her eye?"

"That's true," Perry answered. "Hand-paintin's is meant for city folks. But what can a fellow get? A statue!" His eyes brightened. "That's just the thing—a statue of Washington or Lincoln or General Grant—how's that for an idee, Mark?"

"Excellent, if you are trying to make an impression on her uncle," I answered.

Perry shook his hands despairingly.

"You have come to a poor person at such business, Perry," said I. "What little I know of courting I have from books, and it seems to me that the usual thing is flowers—violets—roses."

My friend straightened up in his chair and gazed at me very long and hard. From me his eyes wandered to the calendar that hung behind my desk.

"November—November," he muttered. "A touch of snow too—and violets and roses."

He leaned toward me fiercely. "Violets come in May," he said. "This here is a matter of weeks."

"I'm serious, Perry," said I. "Books are the thing, and flowers; not wreaths and statues and paintings. You must send something that carries some sentiment with it."

He saw that I was in earnest, and his countenance became brighter.

"Geraniums," he muttered, thumping the table. "I'll get Mrs. Arker to let me have one of them window-plants of hers, and I'll put it in a new tomato-can and paint it. How's that for a starter?"

"I've never read about men sending geraniums," I replied. "It's odd, but I never have. I suppose the can makes them seem a little unwieldly. Still——"

"I had thought of fortygraph album." Perry spoke timidly again.

I had no mind to let him venture any more suggestions. His was too fickle a fancy, and I had settled on an easy solution of the problem. He was to send her a geranium. Somehow, I knew deep down in my own heart, ill versed as I was in such things, that I should never send her such a gift myself. I would climb to the top of Gander Knob for a wild rose or rhododendron; I would stir the leaves from the gap to the river in search of a simple spray of arbutus for her. But step before her with my arms clasping a tin can with a geranium plant? Heaven forbid! Perry was different. The suggestion pleased him. He was rubbing his hands and smiling in great contentment.

"I might send a po-em with it," he said. "I've allus found that poetry kind of catches ahold of a girl when you are away. It keeps you in her

I SAW A GIRL ON THE STORE PORCH

mind. It must be sing-song, though, kind of gettin' into her head like quinine. It must keep time with the splashin' of the churn and the howlin' of the wind. I mind when I was keepin' company with Rhoda Spiker — she afterward married Ulysses G. Harmon, of Hopedale—I sent her a po-em that run somethin' like this: 'I live, I love, my Life, my Light; long love I thou, Sweetheart so bright'——"

Perry's po-em never got into my brain, for as he repeated the captivating lines, I was gazing over his shoulder, out of the window, down the road to the village. I saw a girl on the store porch, standing by the door a moment as if undecided which way to go. Then she turned her head into the November gale and came rapidly up the road. In a minute more she would be passing the school-house door. Tim's letter was in my pocket and the sun was still high over the gable of the mill.

"Rhoda sent me a postal asking me to write her a po-em full of Ks or Xs or Ws, just so as she could get the Ls out of her head, and——"

"Perry!" I broke right into his story and

seized the lapel of his waistcoat as though he were my dearest friend. "My girl is going by the school-house door this very minute. Now you help me. Take the school for the rest of the afternoon."

"Your girl?" cried Perry. His voice broke from the smothered conference tone and the school heard it and tittered. He recovered himself and poked me in the chest.

"Oh!" he said, "Widow Spoonholler—I seen you last Sunday singin' offen the same book—I seen you. Hurry, Mark, hurry; and luck to you! You've done me most a mighty good turn."

X

MARY sat knitting. Beware of a woman who knits. The keenest lawyer in our county is not so clever a cross-examiner as his sister when she sits with her needles and yarn. Questions directed at one can be parried. You expect them and dodge. The woman knits and knits, and lulls you half to sleep, and then in a far-away voice asks questions. They come as a boon, a gracious acknowledgment that you exist, and though in her mind your place is secondary to the flying needles and the tangled worsted, still you are there and she is half listening to what you have to say. So you tell her twice as much as is wise. You have no interest for her. Her eyes are fixed on her work. She asks you the secret of your life, and then bends farther over, seeming to forget your existence. Desperate, you shout it at her, and she looks up

and smiles, a wondering, distraught smile; then goes on knitting.

There were some things in Tim's letter that I did not intend to tell Mary. He had written to me in confidence. A man does not mind letting one of his fellows know that he is in love with a woman, but to let a woman know it is different. She will think him a fool, unless she is his inspiration. I knew Tim. I knew that he was no fool, and I did not wish her to get such an impression. I loved a pretty woman. So did Tim. But Mary would not understand it in Tim's case. That was why I folded the letter when I had read the first four pages.

But Mary was knitting. "It is fine to think he is getting along so well," she said.

She looked up, but not at me. Her face was turned to the window; her eyes were over the valley which was growing gray, for the sun was down. What she saw there I could not tell. A drearier sight is hard to find than our valley when the chill of the November evening is creeping over it as the fire in the west goes out. Night covers it, and it sleeps. But the winter twilight

raises up its shadows. In the darkness all is hidden. In the half-light there is utter loneliness.

I turned from the window to the letter, and Mary looked at me for the first time in many minutes.

"Are you going to read the rest of the letter?" she demanded.

"You have heard 'most all of it," I replied evasively.

"And the rest?" she said.

"Is of no interest," I answered. "It's just a few personal, confidential things. Perhaps some time I can tell you."

"Oh," she exclaimed carelessly, and went on knitting, drawing closer to the lamplight.

"How long is it since he left?" she asked at last, reaching down to untangle the worsted from the end of the rocker.

"Six weeks," said I. "It's just six weeks coming to-morrow since Tim and I parted at Pleasantville. To think he has been promoted already! At that rate he should be head of the firm in a year or two."

"Mr. Weston has been very kind," said she. "Of course he has seen that Tim had every chance. He is the most thoughtful man I ever knew. He——"

Weston's excellent qualities were well known to me. I had discovered them long ago, and I did not care to hear Mary descant on them at length. He had done much for Tim, but it was what Tim had done for himself that I was proud of, so I interrupted her rather rudely.

"Yes, he got Tim his place; but you must remember Mr. Weston has hardly been in New York a day since the boy left. He doesn't bother much about business, so, after all, Tim is working his way alone."

"Yes," said Mary. She had missed a stitch somewhere, and it irritated her greatly. That was evident by the way she picked at it. She remedied the trouble somehow, recovered her composure, and went on knitting.

"Is it eight dollars he is making, did you say?" she asked.

"Yes, eight," I replied, verifying the figure with a glance at the letter.

"A week or a month?"

"A week. Just think of it—that is more than I got in the army."

But Mary was not a bit impressed. I remembered that she came from Kansas, and in Kansas a dollar is not so big as in our valley.

"Living is so expensive in the city," she said absently. "With eight dollars a week here Tim would be a millionaire. But in New York—" A shrug of the shoulder expressed her meaning.

"True," said I, a bit ruefully.

I had expected her to clasp her hands, to look up at me and listen to my stories of Tim's success, and hear my dreams for his future. Instead, she went on knitting, never once raising her eyes to me. It exasperated me. In sheer chagrin I took to silence and smoking. But she would not let me rest long this way, though I was slowly lulling myself into a state of semi-coma, of indifference to her and calm disdain.

"Of course Tim has made some friends," she said, glancing up from her work very casually.

"Of course he has," I snapped.

"That's nice," she murmured—knitting, knitting, knitting.

I expected her to ask who his friends were, and how he had made them. That was all in the letter. Moreover, it was in the part I had not read to her. But she abruptly abandoned this line of inquiry. She did not care. She let me smoke on.

Suddenly she dropped her work and asked, "Is that a footstep on the porch?"

"Footsteps! No—why, who did you think was coming?" I said.

"Mr. Weston promised to drop in on his way home from hunting—but I guess he'll disappoint me. I hoped it was he." She fell to her task again, only now she began to hum softly, thus shutting me off entirely.

For a very long while I endured it, but the time came when action of some kind was called for. We were not married, that I could sit forever smoking while she hummed. Even in Black Log, etiquette requires that a man talk to a woman when in her company; and when the woman ceases to listen, the wise man departs. That was just what I did not want to do, and only

one alternative was left me. I got out the letter and held it under the light.

"You were asking about Tim's friends, Mary," said I.

"Was I?" she returned. "I had forgotten. What did I say?"

"You asked if he had made any friends," I replied, as calmly as I could. "I was going to read you what he said."

"Oh!" she cried. And at last she dropped her knitting, and resting her elbows on her knees, clasping her chin in her hands, she looked up at me from her low chair. "I thought it was forbidden," she said.

"Tim didn't say anything about not reading it," I answered. "At first, though, it seemed best not to; but you'll understand, Mary. Of course, we mustn't take him too seriously, but it does sound foolish. Poor Tim!"

"Poor Tim!" repeated the girl. "He must be in love."

"He is," said I.

"Then don't read it!" she cried. "Surely he never intended you to read it to me."

"Of course he did," I laughed, for at last I had aroused her, and now her infernal knitting was forgotten; she no longer strained her ears for Weston's footfalls. Her eyes were fixed on me. "Poor old Tim! Well, let's wish him luck, Mary. Now listen."

So I read her the forbidden pages.

" 'You should see Edith Parker, Mark. She is so different from the girls of Black Log. Her father is head book-keeper in the store, and he has been very good to me. Last week he took me home to dinner with him. He has a nice house in Brooklyn. His wife is dead, and he has just his daughter. We have no women in Black Log that compare to her. She is tall and slender and has fair hair and blue eyes.' "

"I hate fair-haired women," broke in Mary with some asperity. "They are so vain."

"I agree with you," said I. "That is invariably the case, and dark hair is so much more beautiful; but we must make allowance for Tim. Let us see—'fair hair and blue eyes and the sweetest face'—I do believe that brother of mine is out of his head to write such stuff."

"He certainly is," said Mary, very quietly. "Poor Tim! But go on."

" 'We played cards together for a while, till old Mr. Parker went asleep in his chair, and then Edith and I had a chance to talk. You know, Mark, I've always been a bit afraid of women, and awkward and ill at ease around them. But Edith is different from the girls of Black Log. We were friends in a minute. You don't know what it is to talk to these girls who have been everywhere, and seen everything, and know everything. They are so much above you, they inspire you. For a girl like that no sacrifice a man can make is too great. To win a girl like that a man must do something and be something. Now up in Black Log——' "

"Yes, up in Black Log the women are different," said Mary in a quiet voice. "They have to work in Black Log, and it's the men they work for. If they sat on thrones and talked wisdom and looked beautiful, the kitchen-fires would die out and the children go naked."

"Tim doesn't say anything disparaging to the people of our valley," I protested. "He says, 'in

Black Log the girls don't understand how to dress. They deck themselves out in gaudy finery. Now Edith wears the simplest things. You never notice her gown. You only see her figure and her face.' "

"Do I deck myself out in gaudy finery, Mark?" Mary's appeal was direct and simple.

A shake of the head was my only answer. I wanted to tell her that Tim was blind. I wanted to tell her the boy was a fool; that Edith, the tall, thin, pale creature, was not to be compared to one woman in our valley; that I knew who that woman was; that I loved her. I would have told her this. With a sudden impulse I leaned toward her. As suddenly I fell back. My crutches had clattered to the floor!

A battered veteran! A pensioner! A backwoods pedagogue! That I was. That I must be to the end. My place was in the school-house. My place was on the store bench, set away there with a lot of other broken antiquities. That I should ask a woman to link her life with mine, was absurd. A fair ship on a fair sea soon parts company with a derelict—unless it tows it. A

score of times I had fought this out, and as often I had found but one course and had set myself to follow it, but there was that in Mary's quiet eyes that shook my resolution. There was an appeal there, and trust.

"I am glad, anyway, I am not so much above you, Mark," she said, now laughing.

I gathered up my crutches and the letter. I gathered up my wits again.

"There's where I feel like Tim, indeed," I said.

"I don't think I should like this lofty Edith," the girl exclaimed. "What a pompous word it is—Edith! Tim is ambitious. I suppose he rolls that name over and over in his mind."

It seemed that Mary was unnecessarily sharp toward a young woman she had never seen and of whom she had as yet heard nothing but good. While for myself I felt a certain resentment at Tim for his praise of this girl and the condescending references to my misfortune in never having seen her like, I had for him a certain keen sympathy and hope for his success. I had a certain sympathy for Edith, too, for a man in love, if unrestrained in his praise, will make a plain,

sensible, motherly girl look like a frivolous fool. Perhaps in this case Edith was the victim. I suggested this to Mary, and she laughed softly.

"Perhaps so," she said. "But I must admit it irritates me to see our Tim lose his head over a stranger. I can only picture her as he does—a superior being, who lives in Brooklyn, whose name is Edith, and who wears her hair in a small knot on top of her head. Can you conceive her smile, Mark, if she saw us now—if this fine Brooklyn girl with her city ways dropped down here in Black Log?"

"That's all in Tim's letter," I cried. "Listen. 'She asked all about my home and you. I told her of the place and of all the people, of Mary and Captain. Last night I took over that picture of you in your uniform, and I won't tell you all the nice things she said about you, and——' "

"She's a flatterer," cried Mary.

"I am beginning to love her myself," said I. "But listen to Tim. 'She told me she hoped to see Black Log some day, and to meet the soldier of the valley. I said that I hoped she would, too, but I didn't tell her that a hundred times a day,

as I worked over the books in the office, I vowed that soon I'd take her there myself.' "

"As Mrs. Tim," Mary added, for I was folding up the letter.

"As Mrs. Tim, evidently," said I. "Poor old Tim! It's a very bad case."

"Poor old Tim!" said Mary.

She took up her needles and her work, and fell to knitting.

"I suppose they must be very rich—the Parkers, I mean." This was offered as a wedge to break the silence, for the needles were going very rapidly now, and the stitches seemed to call for the closest watching.

"Yes," said Mary.

I lighted my pipe again.

"What a grand man Tim will be when he comes back home." I suggested this after a long silence. "He'll look fine in his city clothes, for somehow those city men do dress differently from us country chaps. Now just picture Tim in a—in a——"

Mary was humming softly to herself.

XI

THE county paper always comes on Thursday. This was Thursday. Elmer Spiker sat behind the stove, in a secluded corner, the light of the lamp on the counter falling over his left shoulder on the leading column of locals. Elmer was reading. There was a store rule forbidding him to read aloud, which caused him much hardship, for as he worked his way slowly down the column, his right eye and left ear kept twitching and twitching as though trying to keep time with his lips.

Josiah Nummler's long pole rested on the counter at his side, and his great red hands were spread out to drink in the heat from the glowing bowl of the stove.

"It's a-blowin' up most a-mighty, ain't it?" he said, cheerfully. "Any news, Elmer?"

"Oh now, go home," grunted Mr. Spiker, rolling his pipe around so the burning tobacco scat-

tered over his knees. "See what you've done!" he snapped angrily, brushing away the sparks.

"I didn't notice you was in the middle of a word, Elmer, really I didn't," pleaded old Mr. Nummler.

"I wasn't in the middle of a word," retorted Elmer, as he drove his little finger into his pipe in an effort to save some of the tobacco. "I was just beginnin' a new piece. Things is gittin' so there ain't a place left in this town for a man to read in peace and comfort. Here I am, tryin' to post up on the local doin's, on polytics and religion, and ringin' in my ears all the time is 'lickin' the teacher, lickin' the teacher, lickin' the teacher.' S'pose every man here did lick the teacher in his time—what of it, I says, what of it?"

"Yes, what of it?" said I, closing the door with a bang.

I was plodding home from Mary's. She had hummed me out at last, and I had tucked Tim's letter in my pocket and hobbled back to the village. The light in the store had drawn me aside and I stopped a moment just to look in. The

store is always a fascinating place. There is always something doing there, and I opened the door a crack to hear what was under discussion. Catching the same refrain that troubled Elmer Spiker, I entered.

"What of it?" I demanded, facing the company. "I don't believe there is a man here who ever thrashed the teacher."

Theophilus Jones raised himself from the counter on which he was leaning, and waved a lighted candle above his head.

"Here comes the teacher—make way for the teacher!"

Josiah Nummler pounded the floor with his long pole.

"See the conquerin' hero comes," he cried. "A place for him—a place for him!" And with the point of his stick he drove the six men on the bench so close together as to give me an excellent seat.

"Thrice welcome, noble he-ro, as Perry Thomas says!" shouted Aaron Kallaberger, thrusting his hand into his bosom in excellent imitation of the orator.

"He's lookin' pretty spry yet, ain't he, boys?" said Isaac Bolum. He stood before me, leaning over till his hands clasped his knees, and peered into my face, smiling. "The teacher ain't changed a bit."

"Thank you for the reception," said I. "But explain. What's this all about?"

Elmer Spiker folded the county paper and came around to our side of the stove. There he struck his favorite attitude, which was always made most effective by the endless operation of putting his spectacles in their case—pulling them out—waving them—*ad infinitum*. For in our valley spectacles are the sceptre of the sovereign intellect.

"They was talkin' about lickin' the teacher," Elmer said, "and sech talkin' I never heard. It was the nonsensicalest yet. The way them boys was tellin' about the teachers they had knowed made me feel for your life when I seen you come in. I thought they'd fall on you like so many wolves."

"Now see here, Elmer Spiker," shouted Henry Holmes, "that's an injestice. I never said I'd

licked the teacher when I was a boy. I only said I'd tried it."

"You give me to understand that the teacher was dead now," returned Elmer severely.

"He is," cried Henry.

"And you claim you done it."

"I done it," shouted Mr. Holmes, pounding the floor with his cane. "I done it! You think I'm a murderer? Why, old Gilbert Spoonholler was ninety-seven year old when he went away. He was only forty when him and me had it out."

"That's different," said Elmer calmly. "I understood from your original account that he died in battle."

"I tho't so too, Henery," put in Isaac Bolum. "You misled me, complete. 'Here,' says I, 'at last I have met a man who has licked the teacher.' And all the time you was tellin' about it, we was admirin' you—Joe Nummler and me—and now we finds Gil Spoonholler lived fifty-seven year after that terrible struggle."

"I can't just fetch my memory back to that particular incident, Henery," said Josiah, "but my recollection is that Gil Spoonholler held the

school-house agin all comers, and that's sayin' a good deal, for we was tough as hickory when we was young."

"The modern boys is soft," Aaron Kallaberger declared. "They regards the teacher in a friendlier light than they used to. They are weakenin'. The military sperrit's dyin' out. The spectacle is conquerin' the sword."

AARON KALLABERGER.

This was too direct a slap at Elmer Spiker to pass unnoticed. Elmer was too old an arguer to use any ponderous weapon in return. He even smiled as he punctuated his sentences with his battered spectacle-case.

"You never said a truer word, Aaron. It allus was true. It allus will be true. It's just as true to-day as when Henery Holmes tackled old Gilbert Spoonholler; as when Isaac Bolum yander argyed

with Luke Lampson that five times eleven was forty-five; as when you refused to admit to the same kind teacher that Harrisburg was the capital of Pennsylwany."

"And as to-day when William Bellus—" Theophilus Jones was acting strangely. He was bowing politely at me.

I was mystified. Why at a time like this I should be treated as a subject of so much distinction was a puzzle, and I was about to demand an explanation, when Josiah Nummler interrupted.

"It's true," he said. "Teachers ain't changed and the boys ain't changed. I'm eighty year old within a week, and all my life I've heard boys blowin' about how they was goin' to lick the teacher, and I've heard old men tell how they done it years and years before—but I've never seen an eye-witness—what I wants is an eye-witness."

"You've been talkin' to Elmer Spiker," said Henry Holmes, plaintively. "He's convinced you. He'd convince anybody of anything. He's got me so dad-twisted I can't mind no more whether I went to school even."

"You never showed no signs, Henery." Isaac Bolum spoke very quietly.

"I guess you otter know it as well as anybody," Henry retorted angrily. "Your ma was allus askin' me to take care of you, and you was a nuisance, too, you was, Isaac. You was allus a-blubberin' and a-swallerin' somethin'. You mind the time you swallered my copper cent, don't you? You mind the fuss your ma made to my ma about it, don't you? Why, she formulated regular charges that I 'tempted to pizon you—she did, and——"

"Don't rake up them old, old sores," said Josiah Nummler soothingly. "Ike'll give you back your copper cent, Henery."

"All Ike's property to-day ain't as val'able to me now as that cent was then," Mr. Holmes answered solemnly. "It was the val'ablest cent I ever owned. I never expect to have another I'd hate so to see palpitatin' in Isaac Bolum's th'oat between his Adam's apple and his collar-band."

"We're gittin' away from the subject," said Josiah. "You're draggin' up a personal quarrel between you and Isaac Bolum, when we was dis-

cussin' the great problem that confronts every scholar in his day—that of thrashin' the teacher."

"It's a problem no scholar ever solved in the history of this walley, anyway," declared Elmer Spiker.

"It ain't on the records," said Kallaberger.

"There are le-gends," Isaac Bolum said. He pointed at Henry Holmes with his thumb. "Sech as his."

"Yes," said Josiah Nummler, "we have sech le-gends, comin' mostly from the Indians and Henery Holmes. But there's one I got from my pap when I was a boy, and I allus thought it one of the most be-yutiful fairy stories I ever heard —of course exceptin' them in the Bible. It was about Six Stars school, here, and the boy's name was Ernest, and the teacher's Leander. It was told to my pap by his pap, so you can see that as a le-gend it was older than them of Henery Holmes."

"It certainly sounds more interestin'," exclaimed Isaac Bolum.

Old Mr. Holmes started to protest, but Aaron Kallaberger quieted him with an offering of to-

bacco. By the time his pipe was going, Josiah was well into his story.

"Of all the teachers that ever tot in Six Stars this here Leander was the most fe-rocious. He was six foot two inches tall in his stockin's, and weighed no more than one hundred and thirty pound, stripped, but he was wiry. His arms was like long bands of iron. His legs was like hickory saplin's, and when he wasn't usin' them he allus kept them wound round the chair, so as to unspring 'em at a moment's notice and send himself flyin' at the darin' scholar. His face was white and all hung with hanks of black hair; his eyes was one minute like still intellectual pools

LEANDER.

and the next like burnin' coals of fire—that was my pap's way of puttin' it. Ernest was just his opposite. He was a chunky boy with white hair and pale eyes. He was a nice boy when let alone, but in the whole fifteen years of his life he'd never had no call to bound Kansas or tell the capital of Californy outside of school hours, so he regarded Leander with a fierce and childlike hatred. But Ernest had a noble streak in him, too. For himself he would 'a' suffered in silence. It was the constant oppression of the helpless little ones that saddened him. It was maddenin' to have to sit silent every day while tiny girls, no older than ten, was being hounded from one end of the g'ography to the other. He seen small boys, shavers under eight, scratchin' holes in their heads with slate-pencils, tryin' to make out why two and two was four; he seen girls, be-yutiful young girls of his own age, drove almost to distraction by black-boards full of diagrams from the grammar-book. And allus before him, the inspirin' note of the whole systematic system of torturin' the young, was the rod; broodin' over it all, like a black cloud, was Leander's repyta-

"HER NAME WAS PINKY BINN, A DOTTER OF THE HOUSE OF BINN, THE BINNS OF TURKEY WALLEY."

tion, was the memory of the boys as had gone before. For years Ernest bore all this. Then come a time when he was called to a position of responsibility in the school. One after another, the biggest boys had fallen. A few had gradyeated. Others had argyed with the teacher and become as broken reeds, was stedyin' regular and bein' polite like. In them years, whether he wanted it or not, Ernest had rose up. His repytation was spotless. His age entitled him to the Fifth Reader class, but he was still spellin' out words in the Third; fractions was only a dream to him, and he couldn't 'a' told you the difference between a noun and a wild carrot. But through it all he'd been so humble and polite that Leander looked on him as a kind of half-witted lamb."

"This here is the longest fairy story I ever heard tell of," said Elmer Spiker. "We haven't even had a sign of the prin-cess."

"And there is a prin-cess in this here le-gend," returned Josiah. "She was a be-yutiful one, too. Her name was Pinky Binn, a dotter of the house of Binn, the Binns of Turkey Walley. She had the reddish hair of the Binns and the pearl-blue

eyes of the Rummelsbergers from over the mountains. Her ma was a Rummelsberger. She wasn't too spare, nor was she too fleshy; she was just rounded right; and when she smiled—ah, boys, when Pinky Binn smiled at Ernest from behind her g'ography his heart went like its spring had broke. Yet he never showed it. It would have been ruination for him to let it be known by sign or act that Pinky Binn was other than the general class of weemen; for is there anything worse than weemen in general? It's the exceptions, allus the exceptions, raises trouble with a man. Pinky Binn was Ernest's exception. But the time of his great trial come, and he was true. He stepped forth in his right light before all the school; he showed himself what he was—the gentle lover, the masterful fighter, the heroic-est scholar Six Stars school had ever seen."

"He whipped the teacher, I know," cried Henry Holmes. "I told you, Ike—he licked the teacher."

"This here is a fairy story, Henery," returned Isaac reprovingly.

"Even in a fairy story it 'ud be ridiculous to

let a boy of fifteen beat a trained teacher," said Josiah Nummler. "He didn't quite, and it come this way. Leander asked Pinky Binn if he had eleven apples and multiplied them by five how many was they left. She says sixty-five. 'Figure it out agin,' he says, wery stern. So she works her fingers and her lips a-while, like she was deef and dumb. 'Five-timsone is five,' she says, 'and five-timsone agin is five and one to carry is six —sixty-five,' she says. 'Well, I'll be Scotch-Irished,' says Leander gittin' wery angry. 'Sech obtusety' (Leander allus used fancy words) 'is worthy of Ernest yander.' He pinted his long finger at Ernest and says, 'How much is five times eleven apples?' Ernest gits up and faces the teacher, wery ca'am and wery quiet. 'Sixty-five,' says he. 'It's fifty-five,' Leander shouts. Then says Ernest, wery cool, 'Pinky Binn says it's sixty-five, and Pinky Binn ain't no story-teller, and you hadn't otter call her one.' That takes all the talk out of the teacher. He just sets there wrappin' his legs round the chair and glarin'. Ernest's voice rings clear above the school now, like the Declaration of Independence. 'In

Turkey Walley, teacher,' he says, 'five times eleven apples is sixty-five. They raises bigger apples there.'

"Leander's legs unsprung. He ketched Ernest by the hair and lifted him to the platform. Boys, you otter 'a' seen it. It was David and Goliath all over agin, only fightin' fair. Havin' Leander holdin' his hair give the boy an advantage—it was two hands agin one. Leander had but the one to operate his stick with, while Ernest was drivin' both fists right into the darkness in front of him. The stick was making no impression, and some of the small boys that didn't know no better begin to cheer. Boys, you otter 'a' been there. You'd have enjoyed it, Henery. Leander seen what he needed was tactics, and his regular tactics was to hold the scholar at arm's length by the hair. He tried it and it didn't work. Ernest was usin' tactics too. He wasn't wastin' strength and beatin' his arms around. He just smiled. That smile aroused the teacher in Leander agin. He couldn't stand it. He had never had a boy do that before; he forgot himself and sailed in. Boys, that was fightin' then. You'd have en-

joyed it, Henery. Still, I guess it couldn't have been much to watch, for there was nothin' to see but dust—a rollin', roarin' cloud of it, backward and forward over the platform. I don't know just what happened. Pap couldn't tell. Leander couldn't 'a' told you. Ernest couldn't 'a' told you. There was war—real war, and after it come peace."

"Ernest whipped, I know," cried Henry Holmes.

"The teacher was licked—good—good!" shouted Isaac Bolum.

"No, boys," said Josiah solemnly, "that couldn't have been. Even in fairy stories sech things couldn't happen. But when the dust cleared away, Leander's body lay along the floor, and towerin' over him, one foot on his boosom, stood the darin' scholar. I guess the teacher had been took ill."

"Mebbe it was appleplexy," suggested Elmer Spiker.

"Mebbe it was," said Josiah. "It must have been somethin' like that; but whatever it was, there stood the boy. 'You is free,' he says, ad-

dressin' the scholars. And the children broke from the seats and started for'a'd to worship him. And Pinky Binn was almost on her knees at his feet, when a strange thing happened.

"There was music. It come soft first, and hushed the school, and froze the scholars like statutes. Louder it come and louder—a heavenly choir—the melodium, the cordine, and the fiddle. Then a great white light flooded the school-room. It blinded the boys, and it blinded the girls. The music played softer and softer—the melodium, the cordine, and the fiddle—and with it, keepin' time with it, the light come softer, too; so lookin' up the scholars seen there in the celestial glow, a solemn company gethered round the boy—the he-roes of old—Hercules and General Grant, Joshuay and Washington—all the mighty fighters of history. Just one glimpse the scholars had, for the music struck up louder, and the light glowed brighter and brighter till it blinded them. Softer and softer the music come—the melodium, the cordine, and the fiddle. It sounded like marchin', they said, and they heard the tramp, tramp, tramp of the sperrit soldiers. Then there

WILLIAM HAD FELT THE HAND OF "DOOGULUS."

was quiet—only the roarin' of the stove and the snuffin' of the little ones. And when they looked up Leander was alone—settin' there on the platform, kind of rubbin' his eyes—alone."

There was silence in the store. Josiah Nummler's pipe was going full blast, and while the white cloud hid him from the others, I could see a gentle smile on his fat face.

"Mighty souls!" cried Henry Holmes, "that there's unpossible."

Josiah planted his pole on the floor and lifted himself to his feet.

"It's only a fairy story, Henery," he said.

"What does it illustrate?" cried Aaron Kallaberger. "Nothin', I says. We was talkin' about Mark and William Bellus, and you switches off on Leander and Ernest. To a certain pint your story agrees with what my boy told me of the doin's in the school this afternoon."

"What doings?" I exclaimed. This talk puzzled me, and I was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"Why, wasn't you there?" cried Isaac Bolum. "Wasn't it you and William?"

"No," I fairly shouted. "Perry Thomas had the school."

Josiah Nummler's pole clattered to the floor, and he sank into a chair.

"I see—I see," he gasped. "Poor William!"

"I see—I see," said I. "Poor William!"

For William had felt the hand of "Doogulus!"

XII

IT was young Colonel's first day of life. He had been born six months before, but for him that had been simply the beginning of existence. Now he was to live. He was to go with Captain, and with Betsy his mother, with Arnold Arker's Mike and Major, the best of his breed, to learn to take the trail and follow it, singing as he ran.

It was young Colonel's first day of life. He was out in the great dog world, and about him were the mighty hunters of the valley. Arnold Arker was there with his father's rifle, once a flint-lock, always a piece of marvellous accuracy, and a hero as guns go, and the old man patted the puppy and pulled his silky ears. Tip Pulsifer approved of him. Tip shut one eye and gazed at him long and earnestly; he ran his bony fingers down the slender back to the very end of the agitated tail. One by one he took the heavy paws in his hands and stroked them. Then Tip smiled. Murphy Kallaberger smiled too, and

declared that the young un took after his pa; clarifying this explanation he pointed his fat thumb over his shoulder to old Captain, beating around the underbrush.

It was young Colonel's first day of life. And what a day to live, I thought, as I stroked his head and wished him luck! He could not get it into his puppy brain that I was to wait there while the others went racing down the slope into the wooded basin below, so he lingered, to sit before me on his haunches, his head cocked to one side, eyeing me inquisitively. There was a tang in the air. The wind was sweeping along the ridge-top and the woods were shivering. All about us rattled Nature's bones, in the stirring leaves, in the falling pig-nuts, in the crash of the belated birds through the leafless branches. The sun was over us, and as I looked up to drink with my eyes of the warm light, I was taking a draught of God's best wine from off yonder in the north, of the wine that quickens the blood and drives away the brain-clouds. A day of days this was to race over the ridges while the music of the hounds rang through them; a day of days

to dash from thicket to thicket, over the hills and through the hollows, leaping logs and vaulting fences, with every sense keyed to the highest; for the fox is a clever general. So young Colonel was puzzled, for there I was on a log, at the crest of the ridge, with my crutches at one side and my gun at the other, when I should be away after old Captain, the real leader of the sport, after Arnold and Tip and Betsy. This was the best I could do, to sit here and listen and hope—listen as the chase went swinging along the ridges; hope that a kind fate and an unwise Reynard would bring them where I could add the bark of my rifle to the song of the hounds. You can't explain everything to a dog. With a puppy it is still harder. So Colonel was restless. He looked anxiously down the hill; then he lifted those soft, slantwise eyes to mine very wistfully.

"Go, Colonel," I commanded, pointing to the hollow.

Instead, he came to me and lifted to my knee one of those ponderous feet of his, and tried to pull me from my log.

"Aren't you coming?" he seemed to say.

"No, old chap," I answered, pulling the long ears gently till he smiled. "I prefer it here where I can look over the valley, and from here I can see where Mary lives—down yonder on the hillside; that's the house by the clump of oaks, where the smoke is curling up so thick."

The slantwise eyes became grave, and the long tail paused. The second ponderous paw came crashing on my knee.

"Aren't you coming?" young Colonel seemed to say.

I was flattering myself that the puppy was choosing my company to the hunt, for I always value the approval of a dog. Now I found myself hoping that with a little coddling the young hound would forget the great doings down in the hollow and would stay with me on the ridge-top. But I should have known better. There is an end even to a dog's patience. The place for the strong-limbed is in the thick of the chase. You can't interest a puppy in scenery when his fellows are running a fox.

"Look, Colonel," said I, pointing over the valley, "yonder's where Mary lives, and I sus-

pect that at this very minute she is looking out of the window to this very spot, and——"

"AREN'T YOU COMING?" YOUNG COLONEL SEEMED TO SAY.

The call of a hound floated up from the hollow. Old Captain was on a trail. With a shrill cry young Colonel answered. This was no time to loaf with a crippled soldier. With a long-drawn yelp, a childish imitation of his father's bay, he

was off through the bushes. Young Colonel was living. And I was left alone on my log.

But this was my first day of life, too. Some twenty-four years before I had been born, but those years were simply existence. Now I was living. I had a secret. I had hinted at it to young Colonel. Had he stayed, I would have told him more, but like a fool he had gone jabbering off through the bushes, cutting a ludicrous figure, too, I thought, for his body had not yet grown up to his feet and ears, and he carried them off a bit clumsily. Had he stayed I might have told him all, and there never was a bit of news quite so important as that the foolish puppy missed; never a story so romantic as that he might have heard; never in the valley's history an event of such interest. He had scorned it. Now he was with the dog mob down there in the gulch. I could hear them giving tongue, and I knew they were on an old trail. Soon they would be in full cry, but I did not care. It was fine to be in full cry, of course, but from my post on the ridge-top, I could at least keep in sight of the house by the clump of oaks on the hillside.

Last week I should have moped and fumed here, and cursed my luck in being bound to a log on a day like this. Now I turned my face to the sunlight and drank in the keen air. Now I whistled as merry a tune as I knew.

"You seem to take well with solitude," came a voice behind me.

Looking about, I saw Robert Weston fighting his way through the thicket.

"I take better to company," I said. "Why have you deserted the others?"

Weston sat down at my side with his gun across his knees.

"Arnold Arker says there is a fox in that hollow," he answered. "You can hear the dogs now, and he thinks if they start him, this is as good a place as any, as he is likely to run over on Buzzard ridge, and double back this way, or he'll give us a sight of him as he breaks from the gully. Then as we went away, I looked back and saw you sitting here and I envied you, for yours is the most comfortable post in all the ridges."

"When you could be somewhere else, yes,"

said I. "Having to sit here, I should prefer running closer to the dogs."

"As you have to stay here, I'd rather sit with you, and after all what could be better?" Weston laughed. "You know, Mark, in all the valley you are the man I get along with best."

"Because I've never tried to find out why you were here."

"For that reason I told you," said he. "How simple it was, too. There was no cause for mystery."

"It would still be a mystery to Elmer Spiker, say. He can't conceive a man living in the country by choice."

"To Elmer Spiker—indeed, to most of the folks around here, the city is man's natural environment. It's just bad luck to be country-born."

"Exactly," said I.

Weston is a keen fellow. There was a quiet, cynical smile on his face as he sat there beating a tattoo on his leggings with a hickory twig.

"Look at your brother," he exclaimed after a while. "I always told Tim that if he knew what was best he'd stay right here and——"

"If you told him that now, he would laugh at you," I interrupted.

Weston looked surprised.

"Does he like work?" he exclaimed.

"The boy is in love," I answered.

Weston dropped the hickory twig, and turning, gazed at me.

"I knew that," he said. "I knew that long ago."

"With Edith Parker," I hastened to explain. "You know her?"

"Oh—oh," he muttered.

He pulled out a cigar-case and a box of matches and spent a long time getting a light.

Then with a glance of inquiry, he said, "Edith Parker?"

"Why, don't you know her?" I asked.

"I know a half a hundred Parkers," he replied. "I may know Edith Parker, but I can't recall her."

"This one is your book-keeper's daughter," I said with considerable heat.

"Indeed," said he calmly. "Parker—Parker—I thought our book-keeper's name was Smyth. Yes—I'm quite sure it's Smyth."

"But Tim says it's Parker," said I. "Tim ought to know."

"Tim should know," laughed Weston. "I guess he does know better than I. A minute ago I would have sworn it was Smyth; but to tell the truth, I never gave any attention to such details of business. Well, Edith is my book-keeper's daughter."

"She lives in Brooklyn," said I, "and she is very beautiful. Every letter I get from Tim, the more beautiful she becomes, for in all my life I never heard of a fellow as frank as he is. Usually men hide what sentiment they have except from a few women, but his letters make me blush when I read them."

"They are so full of gush," said Weston, calmly smoking.

He seemed very indifferent, and to be more listening to the cries of the dogs working around the hollow than to the affairs of the Hope family.

"Gush is the word for it," I answered. "Tim never gives me a line about himself. It's all Edith—Edith—Edith."

"And he is engaged to Miss Smyth?" Weston

struck his legging a sharp blow with his stick. "Confound it!" he cried, "I can't get it out of my head that our book-keeper's name is Smyth."

"But Tim knows, surely," said I.

"Yes—he must," answered Weston. "Of course I'm wrong. But this Miss Parker—are they engaged?"

"I can't tell from his last letter," I replied. "It seems that they must be pretty near it—that's what Mary says, too."

Weston started. Then he rose to his feet very slowly, and wheeling about looked down on me and smoked.

"Mary says so too," he repeated. "How in the world does Mary know?"

"I read her the letter," said I, apologetically. It did seem wrong to read Tim's letter that way. From my standpoint it was all right now, but Weston did not know that, so he whistled softly to himself.

From the hollow came the long-drawn cry of the hound. It was old Captain. Betsy joined in, then Mike; and now the ridges rang with the music of the chase. They were on a fresh trail;

they were away over hill and hollow, singing full-throated as they ran.

"They've found him," I cried, rising to hear the song of the hounds.

Weston sat down on the log.

"They are making for the other ridge," said I, pointing over the narrow gully. "Hark! There's young Colonel."

But Weston went on smoking. "Poor Tim!" I heard him say.

Full and strong rang the music of the dogs, as they swung out of the hollow, up the ridge-side. For a moment, in the clearing, I had a glimpse of them, Captain leading, with Betsy at his haunches, and Mike and Major nose and nose behind them. Far in the rear, but in the chase, was little Colonel. A grand puppy, he! All ears and feet. But he runs bravely through the tangled brush. Many a stouter dog comes from it with flanks all torn and bloody. I waved my hat wildly, cheering him on. I called to him loudly, in the vain hope he might look back, as though at a time like this a hound would turn from the trail. On he went into the woods—nose to the

ground and body low—all feet and ears—and a stout heart!

"Now we must wait," I said, "and watch, and hope."

Already they had turned the crest of the hill, and fainter and fainter came the sound of the chase.

"Mark," Weston began, "I hope this affair of Tim's turns out all right. What little I can do shall be done, and to-night I'm going to write to the office that they must help him along. He deserves it."

"But the poorer men are, the greater their love," I laughed. "With money to marry, Tim might think that after all he'd better look around more—take a choice."

"But Tim is the most serious person that ever was," returned Weston. "I have found that out. Once he makes up his mind, there is no changing it. He is full of ideas. He actually thinks that a man who is in business is doing something praiseworthy; that a man who has bought and sold merchandise at a profit all his life can fold his hands when he dies and say, 'I have not lived

in vain.' He does not know yet that the larger estate a man leaves to his relatives the more useful his life has been. Now I suppose he hopes some day to be a tea-king. Perhaps he will. I hope so. I don't want the job. But once he has picked out his queen, you can't change him by making marriage a financial impossibility."

"Well, I'm certainly not protesting against your raising his salary," said I.

"You needn't. To tell the truth, it's too late. I wrote to the office about that yesterday."

It was of no use to thank Weston for anything. I tried to, but he brushed it aside airily and told me to attend to my own affairs and light one of his cigars. When we were smoking together, his mood became more serious, and as he spoke of Tim and Tim's ambition, and of his interest in the boy, he was carried back to his own earlier life. So for the first time I came to understand his prolonged stay in the valley.

Like Elmer Spiker, in my heart Weston's conduct puzzled me. When he told me that he had come here simply because he liked the country I believed him that far, but I suspected some

deeper reason to keep a man of his stamp dawdling in a remote valley. Now it was so simple. The foundation of Weston's fortunes had been laid in one small saloon; its bulk had been built on a chain stretching from end to end of the city. Its founder had been a coarse, uneducated man, but his success in the liquor trade had been too great to be forgotten, even years after he had abandoned it and built up the great commercial house that bore his name. His ambition for his son had been boundless. He had spared nothing to make him a better man in the world's eye than his father. He had succeeded. But the world had persisted in remembering the parental bar. Robert Weston had never seen that bar, for he had entered on the scene when there was a chain of them, and his father had brought him up almost in ignorance of their very existence. Even at the university he had little reason to be ashamed of them. It was after he had spent years in rounding out his education abroad, and had returned to take his place in those circles which he believed he was entitled to enter, that he found that the world persisted in pointing to

the large revenue stamp that seemed to cling to him. A stronger man would have fought against odds like those and won for himself a place that would suffer no denial. But Weston was physically a delicate man. By nature he was retiring, rather than aggressive. If those who were his equals would have none of him because of his father's faults, then he would not seek them. Equally distasteful were those who equalled him in wealth alone, for by a strange contradiction, the very fact that the rumshop did not jar on their sensibilities, marked them for him as coarse and uncongenial. Weston had turned to himself. It is the study of oneself that makes cynics. The study of others makes egotists. Then a woman had come. Of her Weston did not say much, except that she had made him turn from himself for a time to study her. He had become an egotist and so had dared to love her. She had loved him, he thought, for she said so, and promised to become his wife. Things were growing brighter. But they met an officious friend. They were in Venice at the time, he having joined her there with her family. The officious friend

joined the family too, and he held up his hands in horror when he heard of it. Didn't the family know? Oh, yes, Bob was himself a fine fellow; but he was Whiskey Weston!

"Of course, no good woman wants to be Mrs. Whiskey Weston," said my friend grimly. "Still, I think she did care a bit for me; but it was all up. Back I came, and here I am, Mark, just kind of stopping to stretch my legs and rest a little and breathe. I came on a wheel, for I had ridden for miles and miles trying to get my mind back on myself the way it used to be."

Then he smoked.

"Is that the dogs again?" I said, to break the oppressive silence.

Weston did not heed me, but pointed down the valley to the house by the clump of oaks.

"Do you know sometimes I think that Mary there, with all her bringing up, would edge away from me if she knew that my father had kept saloons and gambling places and all that." Weston spoke carelessly, puffing at his cigar, for he had recovered his easy demeanor. "I think a world of Mary, Mark. She is beautiful, and

good, and honest. Sometimes I suspect that I've stayed here just for her. Sometimes I think I will not leave till she goes—" Weston sprang to his feet. "It's the dogs! Hear them!" he cried.

I was up too. Away down the ridge we heard the bay of the hounds again.

"I want to tell you something," I said, pointing to the house by the clump of oaks. "I wish for your sake that there were two Marys, Weston. But there is only one, and she *is* good and beautiful, and for some reason—Heaven only knows why—she is going to be my wife."

Weston stepped back and gazed at me. I did not blame him. He seemed to study me from head to foot, and I knew that he was trying to find some reason why the girl should care for me. It was natural. I had puzzled over the same problem and I had not solved it. Now I did not care.

"Stare on," I cried, laughing. "You can't think it queerer than I do. It's hard for me to convince myself that it is true."

"I am glad," he said, taking my hand in a

warm grasp. "It isn't strange at all, Mark, for Mary is a wise woman."

"There are the dogs," said I; "they are getting nearer."

"They are coming our way at last," he returned quietly. "But what's that to us when you are to be married? I wish you joy and I shall be at the wedding, and it must be soon, too, and Tim shall be here." He was speaking very rapidly; his face was pale and his hand trembled in mine. "I'll send for him. Tim must have a holiday, and perhaps he'll bring Miss—Miss Smyth." Weston laughed. "Parker," he corrected. "He'll bring Miss Parker or Mrs. Tim."

Full and strong the bay of the hounds was ringing along the ridges. Nearer and nearer they were coming. Now I could hear old Captain's deep tones, and the shorter, sharper tongue of Betsy, Mike, and Major. The fox was keeping to the ridge-top and in a few moments he would be sweeping by us. I pointed through the woods to a bit of clearing made by a charcoal burner. If he kept his course the fox would cross it, and that meant a clear shot. Weston knew the place,

and without a word he picked up his gun and hurried through the woods.

Nearer and nearer came the hounds. The woods were ringing with their music, and the sound of the chase swung to and fro, from ridge to ridge. Now I could hear the crashing of the underbrush.

Weston fired. The report rattled from hill to hill.

My own gun sprang to the shoulder, but it was too late. The fox, seeing me, veered down the slope, and swept on to safety or to death, for six more anxious hunters were watching for him somewhere in those woods.

The dogs swept by, old Captain as ever leading, with Betsy at his haunches and Mike and Major neck and neck behind.

I watched for little Colonel. A minute passed and he did not come. Poor puppy! He had learned that to live was to suffer. Somewhere in these woods he must be lying, resting those ponderous paws and licking his bloody flanks.

The hollow was alive with the bay of dogs; the ridges were ringing with the echoes of a gun-

SAT LITTLE COLONEL, WAILING.

shot; but above them all I heard a plaintive wail over there in the charcoal clearing. I called for Weston and I got no answer, only the cry of the little hound. I called again and I got no answer. Through the bushes I tore as fast as my crutches would take me, calling as I ran and hearing only the wail of the puppy, till I broke from the cover into the open.

On his haunches, his slantwise eyes half closed, his head lifted high in the bright sunlight, sat little Colonel, wailing. He heard me call. He saw me. And when I reached him he was licking the white face of Whiskey Weston.

XIII

HINDSIGHT is better than foresight. A foolish saying. By foresight we do God's will. By hindsight we would seek to better His handiwork. Things are right as they are, I say, as I sit quietly of an evening smoking my pipe on my porch, watching the mountains in the west bathe in the gold and purple of the descending sun. What might have been, might also have been all wrong. A foolish saying, says Tim, for if what might have been should actually be, then we should have the realization of our fondest dreams. And with that realization might come a dreadful awakening from our dreams, say I. You might have become a tea-king, Tim, and measure your fortune in millions. I might have turned lawyer instead of soldier; I might have made a great name for myself in Congress by long speeches full of dry facts and figures, or short ones puffed up with pompous phrases.

The fact that Six Stars existed might have gone beyond our valley because here you and I were born, and for a time we honored the place with our presence. Suppose all that had been, and you the tea-king and I the great lawyer sat here together as we sit now, smoking, could you add one note to the evening peace; would the night-hawk pay us homage by a single added ring as he circles among the clouds; would the bull-frogs in the creek sing louder to our glory; would the bleating of the sheep swing in sweeter to the music of the valley? And look at God's fire-place, I cry, pointing to the west, where the sun is heaping the glowing cloud coals among the mountains. God's fireplace? says Tim, with a queer look in his eyes. Yes, say I, and the valley is the hearthstone. The mountains are the andirons. Over them, piled sky high, the cloud-logs are glowing, and never logs burned like those, all gold and red. Night after night I can sit here and warm my heart at that fireside. Could you, tea-king, buy for my eyes a picture more wonderful? The fire is dying. The cloud coals grow fainter—now purple; and now in

ashes they float away into the chill blue. But they will come again. Could your millions, tea-king, buy for me a sweeter music than the valley's heart throb as it rocks itself to sleep?

"No," Tim answers, "but suppose——"

"And could I have better company to watch and listen with?" I exclaim. "For with you a tea-king, Tim, and I a lawyer, it would be just the same, would it not?"

"That's just what I was trying to get at," says Tim. "Suppose that day of the fox-hunt you had not carried Weston——"

I hold up my hand to check him.

"Were it to happen a hundred times over, I would take him to Mary's," I cry. "Else he would have died."

"You are right, Mark," Tim says.

. . . . . .

I took Weston to Mary's house that day when I found him lying in the charcoal clearing, with little Colonel standing over him wailing. Tearing open his coat and shirt, I stanched his wound as best I could. Then I called the others to me. Tip and Arnold picked him up and

carried him, while Murphy Kallaberger and I broke a path through the bushes, and Aaron ran on to Warden's to tell them of the accident and have them prepare for the wounded man. Warden's was the nearest house, but that was a mile from the clearing, and in the woods our progress was slow. Once free of the ridges and in the open fields the way was easy, and Murphy could lend a hand to the others.

"He's monstrous light," Tip said. "He doesn't seem no more than skin and bones in fancy rags."

It is strange how even our clothes go back on us when we are down. Weston I had always known as a lanky man, but about his loosely fitting garments there had been an air of careless distinction. Now that he was broken, they hung with such an odd perversion as to bring from its hiding-place every sharp angle in the thin frame. The best nine tailors living could not have clothed him better for that little journey, nor lessened a whit the pathos of the thin arms that lay limply across the shoulders of Tip and Arnold.

"He's a livin' skelington," old Arker whis-

pered, as I plodded along at his side. "Poor devil!"

"Poor devil!" said I. For looking at the almost lifeless man I thought of my own good fortune. This morning I had envied him. Now he had nothing but his wealth, and his hold on that was weakening fast. I had everything—life and health, home and friends—I had Mary. As we parted a few minutes before, up there in the woods, I had pitied him. He had seemed so lonely, so bitter in his loneliness, and yet at heart so good. Now his eyes half opened as they carried him on, his glance met mine in recognition, and it seemed to me that he smiled faintly. But it was the same bitter smile. "Poor devil!" I said to myself.

And we carried him into Mary's house.

She was waiting for us, and without a word led us upstairs to a room where we laid him on a bed.

"I stumbled, Mark, I stumbled," he whispered, as I leaned over him. "The fox came and I ran for it—then I fell—and then the little hound came, and then——"

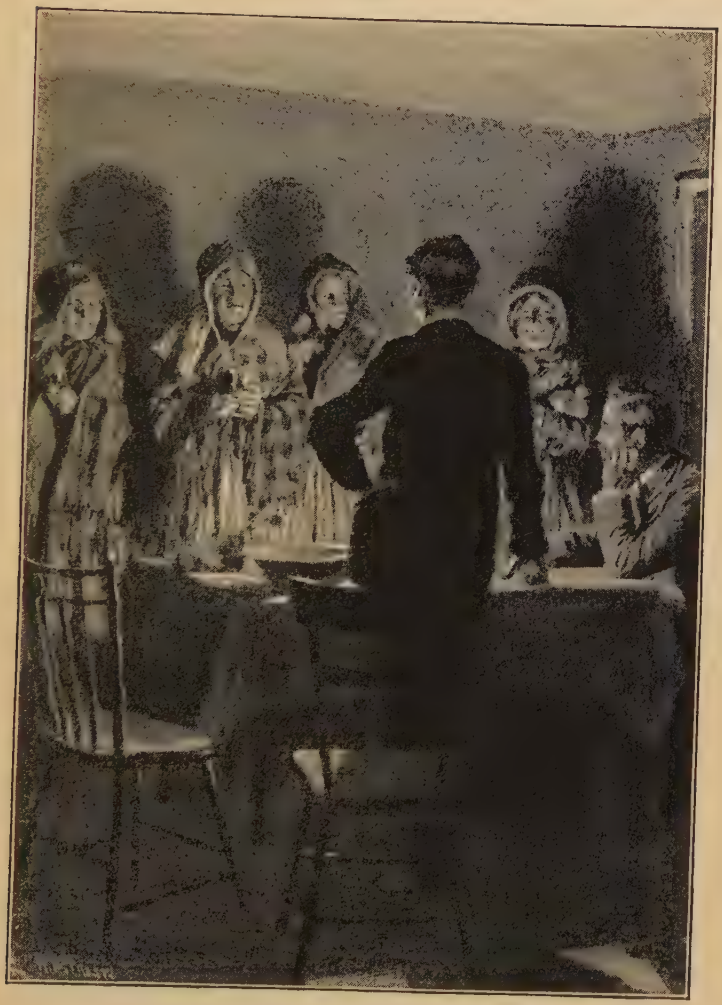
Mary was bathing his forehead, and for the first time he saw her.

"I stumbled, Mary," he whispered. "I swear it."

. . . . . .

It was nearly ten o'clock when I left Weston's room. The doctor was with him and was preparing to bivouac at the patient's side. He was a young man from the big valley. Luther Warden had driven to the county town and brought him back to us. The first misgivings I had when I caught sight of his youthful, beardless face were dispelled by the business-like way in which he went about his work. He had been in a volunteer regiment, he told me, as an assistant surgeon, but had never gone past the fever camps, so this was his first case of a gunshot wound. He had made a study of gunshot wounds, and deemed himself fortunate to be in when Mr. Warden called. Truly, said I to myself, one man's death is another man's practice. But it was best that he was so confident, and I found my faith in him growing as he worked. The wound

was a bad one, he said, and the ball had narrowly missed the heart, but with care the man would come around all right. The main thing was proper nursing. The young doctor smiled as he spoke, for standing before him in a solemn row were half the women of Six Stars. Mrs. Bolum was there with a tumbler of jelly; Mrs. Tip Pulsifer had brought her "paytent gradeated medicent glass," hoping it would be useful; Mrs. Henry Holmes had no idea what was needed, but just grabbed a hot-water bottle as she ran. Elmer Spiker's better half was there to demand her injured boarder at once; he paid for his room at the tavern; it was but right that he should occupy it and that she should care for him. When she found that she could not have him entirely, she compromised on the promise that she would be allowed to watch over him the whole of the next day. In spite of the jar of jelly, the doctor chose Mrs. Bolum to help him that night, and when I left them the old woman was sitting in a rocker at the bedside, her eyes watching every movement of the sleeping patient's drawn face.



THE MAIN THING WAS PROPER NURSING.

Outside, the wind was whistling. The steady beating of an oak branch on the porch roof told me it was blowing hard. It sounded cold. Mary stood tiptoe to reach my collar and turn it up. Then she buttoned me snug around the neck. It was the first time a woman had ever done that for me. How good it was! I absently turned the collar down again and tore my coat open. Then I smiled.

Again she raised herself tiptoe before me, and with a hand on each shoulder, she stood looking from her eyes into mine.

"You fraud!" she cried.

Then I laughed. Lord, how I laughed! Twenty-four years I had lived, and until now I had never known a real joke, one that made the heart beat quicker, and sent the blood singing through the veins; that made the fingers tingle, the ears burn, and brought tears to the eyes. I don't suppose that other people would have thought this one so amusing. The young doctor upstairs might not have deigned a smile, for instance. That was what made it all the better for me, for it was my own joke and Mary's, and in

all the world I was the only man who could see the fun of it.

"When you turn that collar up again I am going," said I.

So she sprang away from me, laughing, and quick as I reached out to seize her, she avoided me.

"You know I can't catch you," I cried, taunting her, "so I must wait."

As she stood there before me quietly, her hands clasped, her eyes looking up into mine, I saw how fair she was, and I wondered. The picture of Weston in the woods, standing off there gazing at me, came back then, and with it a vague feeling of fear and distrust. I saw myself as Weston saw me, and I marvelled.

"Mary," I said, "this morning up there in the woods I told Robert Weston everything, and he stood off just as you are standing now. It seemed to me he wondered how it could be true, and now I wonder too. Maybe it's all a mistake."

"It's not a mistake, Mark," the girl said, and she came to me again and put a hand on each shoulder and looked up. "If I did not care for

you I'd never have given you the promise I did last night. But I do care for you, Mark, more than for anyone else in the world. You are big and strong and good—that's why—it's all any woman can ask. You are true, Mark—and that's more than most men——"

"But, Mary, there's Tim," I protested, for I did not care to usurp to myself the sum of all the virtues allotted to my sex.

"Tim?" said she lightly, as though she had never heard of him.

"Yes, Tim," I said shortly. "Why did you choose me instead of a lad like Tim?"

"Mark, I care for you more than anyone else in the world," said Mary.

"But do you love me?" I asked quickly.

"I think I do," she said. But reaching up, she turned my collar again and buttoned my coat against the storm.

XIV

TIM was home in three days. His few months of town life had wrought many changes in him, and they were for the better. I was forced to admit that, but I could not help being just a little in awe of him. He was not as heavy as of old, but there was more firmness in his face and figure. Perhaps it was his clothes that had given him a strange new grace, for in the old days he was a ponderous, slow-moving fellow. Now there was a lightness in his step and quickness in his every motion. Had I not known him, I should have seen in the scrupulous part in his hair a suggestion of the foppish. But I knew him, and while I liked him best with his old tousled head, and tanned face, and homely hickory shirt, I felt a certain pride that he had taken so well with the world and was learning the ways of the town as well as those of the field and wood. His gloves did seem foolish, for it was a bitter December day when the blood had best had

full swing in the veins, but he held out to me a hand pinched in a few square inches of yellow kid. The grasp was just as warm though, and I forgave that. When he threw aside his silly little overcoat and stood before me, so tall and strong, so clean-cut and faultless, from the part in his hair to the shine on his boot-tips, I cried, "Heigh-ho, my fine gentleman!"

Then he blushed. I suspected that it pleased him vastly.

"Do you think it an improvement?" he faltered, standing with his back to the fireplace and lifting himself to his full height.

Before I could reply, the door flew open without the formality of a knock, and old Mrs. Bolum ran in. When she saw him, she stopped and stared.

"Well, ain't he tasty!" she cried.

Then she courtesied most formally. "How do you do, Mr. Hope?" she said.

"And how is Mrs. Bolum?" returned Tim gravely, advancing toward her with his hand outstretched.

The old woman rubbed her own hand on her

apron, an honor usually accorded only to the preacher, and held it out. Tim seized it, but he brought his other arm around her waist and lifted her from the floor in one mighty embrace.

WELL, AIN'T HE TASTY.

"You'll spoil your Sunday clothes," panted Mrs. Bolum, when she reached the floor again. Stepping back, she eyed him critically. "You

look handsomer than a drummer," she cried admiringly.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Tim very meekly.

"I'm so sorry I left my spectacles at home," she went on. "My eyes ain't as good as they used to be and I can't see you plain as I'd like. Mebbe it's my sight as is the trouble, but it seems to me, as I see you now without my glasses, you're just about the prettiest man that ever come to Six Stars."

"Lord, ma'am," protested Tim. "And how is Mr. Bolum?"

"And such a lovely suit," continued the old woman, cautiously approaching and moving her hand across my brother's chest. "Why, Tim, you must have on complete store clothes—dear, oh, dear—to think of Tim Hope gittin' so fine and dressy! Now had it 'a' been Mark I wouldn't 'a' been so took back, for he allus was uppy and big feelin'. But Tim!"

Mrs. Bolum shook her head and held her hands up in astonishment.

"And how is Mr. Bolum?" shouted Tim.

"Never was better, 'ceptin' for his rheumatism

and asphmy," was the answer, but the good woman was not to be turned aside that way. "And a cady," she cried, for her eyes had caught Tim's hat and the silly yellow overcoat on the chair where I had thrown them. "A cady, too! Now just put it on and let me see how you look."

Tim obeyed. Mrs. Bolum stepped back to get a better effect.

"It ain't as pretty as your coon-skin," she said critically; "you'd look lovely in that suit with your coon-skin cap—but hold on—don't take it off—I want Bolum to see you."

She ran from the room and we heard her calling from the porch: "Bo-lum—Bo-lum—Isaac Bo-oh-lum."

Isaac was at the store. It seemed to me that his wife should have known that without much research. The little pile of sticks by the kitchen-door showed that his day's work was done, for when he had split the wood for the morrow it was the old man's custom to put aside all worldly care and start on a tour of the village, which generally ended on the bench at Henry Holmes's side.

It was almost dusk. Tim had come on a mission to Robert Weston. I had sent word to him of the accident, that Weston's friends might know, and the first thought of the injured man's partner was to hurry to Six Stars, but my second despatch, announcing that our friend was well on the road to recovery, led to the change in plans that brought Tim to us. Mrs. Bolum did not succeed in alarming the village before he and I were well up the road, past the school-house and climbing the hill to Warden's.

Tim had a great deal to tell me in that short walk. I had much to tell him, but I was silent and let him chatter on, giving but little attention to what he said, for I was planning a great surprise. The simplest thing would have been to tell him my secret then, but I had pictured something more dramatic. I wanted Mary to witness his dumfounding when he heard the news. I wanted her to be there when its full import broke upon him; then the three of us, Mary and Tim and I, would do a wild jig. What boon companions we should be—we three—to go through life together! And Edith? Four of us—so much

the better! I had never seen this Edith, but Tim is a wonderful judge of women.

So I let him talk on and on about the city and his life there, until we reached the house. We found that Mrs. Spiker had secured her rights, and was on duty that day as nurse. The young doctor was there, too, as were Mrs. Tip Pulsifer and a half dozen others, a goodly company to greet us.

"Hello, Mary!" Tim cried, breaking through the others, when he caught sight of her, standing at the foot of the stairs with a lighted candle in her hand.

"Hello, Tim!" cried Mary. "And where is Edith?"

"Edith?" Tim exclaimed, stopping as if to collect the thoughts her sudden taunting question had scattered. "I left her behind this time, but when I come again you shall see her." Tim, with arms akimbo, stood there laughing.

"We country girls, I understand, cannot compare with her," said Mary, tilting her chin.

She had started up the stairs, and now paused, looking down on us. And I looked up at her

face showing out of the darkness in the half light, and I laughed, wondering what Tim thought, wondering if he was blind, or was this Edith really bewildering.

"Did I say that?" cried Tim. "Then I must have meant it when I said it. To-night I have learned better, Mary, but you know I never saw you standing that way before—on the stairs above me—kind of like an angel with a halo——"

"Indeed!" retorted Mary; "but we women of Black Log deck ourselves out in gaudy finery, Mr. Tim, I believe. We women of Black Log do not inspire a man, like your Edith."

"Confound my Edith!" Tim exclaimed hotly. "Why, Mary, can't you see I was joking? The idea of comparing Edith with you—why, Mary——"

Tim in his protest started to mount the stairs, and there was an earnestness in his tone that made me think it high time he knew our secret, for his own sake and for Edith's. It seemed to me unfair of him to desert her so basely in the presence of an enemy. He should have stood by her to the very end, and had he boldly declared

that as compared to her Mary was a mummy I should have admired him the more; I should have understood; I should have known he was mistaken, but endured it. Now I seized him by the coat and pulled him back.

"Tim," I said solemnly, "I have something to tell you."

My brother turned and gave me a startled look.

"Mary and I have something to tell you," I went on.

That should have given him a clew. I had expected that at this point he would embrace me. But he didn't.

"I suppose you think I've been a fool about Edith?" he muttered ruefully.

"No, it isn't that," I laughed. "Mary, will you tell him?"

But we were in darkness! She had dropped the candle, and down the stairs the stick came clattering. It landed on the floor and went rolling across the room. Tim made a dive for it. He groped his way to the corner where its career had ended. Then he lighted it again.

Behind us stood the doctor, and Mrs. Tip Pul-

sifer, and Elmer Spiker's much better half. Mary was at the head of the stairs.

"Come, Tim," she called. "Mr. Weston wants to see you."

"Weston does want to see you very much, Tim," the wounded man said smiling, lifting a thin hand from the bed for my brother; "I heard you chattering downstairs, and I thought you were never coming."

"It was Mary's fault," Tim said. "I came back as soon as I could, sir. Mr. Mills sent me up on the night train—out this afternoon in a livery rig—here afoot just as fast as Mark would let me—then Mary blocked the way. Mark was going to tell me something when she dropped the candle."

"Why, don't you know—" began Weston.

But over my brother's shoulders I shook my head sternly at him and he stopped and broke into a laugh.

Mrs. Elmer Spiker was standing by him; the young doctor was moving about the room, apparently very busy; Mrs. Tip Pulsifer was peeping in at the door.

"Didn't you know," said Weston, "how I'd shot myself all to pieces, and how there's a live fox in the hollows across the ridge?"

"Mark told me of it," answered the innocent Tim, "and I'm glad to find it is not serious. They were worried at the store. Mr. Mills was for coming right away, but we got word you were better, and he thought I should run up anyway for a day to see if we could do anything. I'm to go back to-morrow."

"It was good of you to come," Weston said, "but there is nothing to be done. Just tell Mills the whole valley is nursing me; tell him that I've one nurse alone who is worth a score." Mrs. Spiker looked very conscious, but Weston smiled at Mary. Then he quickly added: "Tell him that Mrs. Bolum and Mrs. Spiker and Mrs. Pulsifer—" he paused to make sure that none was missed—"and Mark here are a hospital corps, taken singly or in a body."

"I've told him that already," said Tim. "He knows everybody in Six Stars, I guess, and he says as soon as you get well and come back to the office, he will take a holiday himself, fox hunting."

"Poor little Colonel!" murmured Weston. "He'll have a melancholy career. And Mary, too, she'll——"

"But it was when I told him about Mary that he made up his mind to come," Tim said.

"Indeed." The girl spoke very quietly. "And, perhaps, Tim, you'll send Edith along to help us. We women of Black Log are so clumsy."

"A good idea," said Weston. "Capital. You must bring Miss Smyth up, too, Tim."

"Parker," I corrected, "Edith Parker."

"But is it Parker?" Weston appealed to my brother. "Mark tells me she's the book-keeper's daughter. Has old Smyth gone?"

"No," Tim stammered, very much confused. "I guess you don't know Parker. He's come lately."

"That explains it, then," said Weston.

But he turned and looked away from us, his brow knitted. Something seemed to puzzle him, for he was frowning, but by and by the old cynical smile came back.

He said suddenly: "Tim, I wish you luck. I'm glad anyway it isn't Smyth's daughter. That

was what I couldn't understand. Ever see Smyth's daughter? No. Well, you needn't bemoan it. I dare say Miss Parker is all you picture her, and I hope you'll win."

"Don't you think you'd better rest now?" asked Tim, with sudden solicitation. Though he addressed himself to Weston, his eyes were appealing to the doctor.

"I think I had," Weston answered, not waiting for the physician to interpose any order. "I get tuckered out pretty easily these days, with this confounded bullet-hole in me—but stay a moment, Tim. They've got a letter from me at the office by this time. It may surprise them; it may surprise you, but I wanted you to know I'd fixed it all right for you, my boy. I did it for Edith's sake."

Tim, with face flushed and hands outstretched in protest, arose from his chair and went to the bedside.

"But don't you see it's all a joke," he cried. "I can't take it. Won't you believe me this time? There isn't any Edith!"

"I knew that long ago, Tim," Weston an-

swered quietly. "But there may be some day."

He turned his back to us.

"Please go," he said brusquely. "I want to rest. Don't stand over me that way, Tim. Why, you look like little Colonel!"

. . . . . .

At the school-house door Tim halted suddenly.

"I'm going back, Mark," he whispered, "just for a minute. Weston will think I'm a fraud and I want to tell him something. Now that the others have left I may have a chance. Confound these kind-hearted women that overrun the house! Why, a fellow couldn't say a word without a dozen ears to hear it."

"I'll go back with you," said I.

We had fallen a few steps behind the others, but somehow they divined our purpose and stopped, too.

"You needn't," said Tim. "I'll only be a minute."

"But I've something to tell you—a secret—and Mary——"

He was gone.

"I'll be back in a minute," he called. "Go on home."

He was lost in the darkness, and I started after him.

"Ain't you comin'?" cried Nanny Pulsifer.

"BUT THERE ARE NO GHOSTS," I ARGUED.

"I must go back to Warden's," I answered.

"Then we'll go with you," said Mrs. Spiker firmly.

"Can't you go on home?" I said testily. "There's no use of your troubling yourself further."

"Does you think we'll walk by that graveyard alone?" demanded the tavern-keeper's wife.

"But there are no ghosts," I argued.

"We know that," returned Mrs. Pulsifer. "Everybody knows that, but it's never made any difference."

"A graveyard is a graveyard even if there is no bodies in it," said Mrs. Spiker, planting herself behind me so as to cut off further retreat.

Tim must have caught some echoes of the argument on the spirit world, for down the hill, through the darkness, came his call.

"Go on home, Mark—I'll be back in a minute."

I believed him, and I obeyed.

XV

TIM'S minute? God keep me from another as long!

I had my pipe in my chair by the fire, and knocking the ashes out, I went to the door, and with a hand to my ear listened for his footsteps. Tim's minutes are long! Another pipe, and the clock on the mantel marked nine. Still I smoked on. He had had a long talk with Weston, perhaps, and had stopped downstairs for a minute with Mary. She had told him all. How astounded the boy must be! Why, it would take her a half hour at least to convince him that she spoke the truth when she told him she was to marry his wreck of a brother; then when he believed it, another half hour would hardly be enough for him to welcome her into the family of Hope, and to talk over the wonderful fortunes of its sons. Doubtless he had felt it incumbent on himself to sing my praises, for he had always been blind to my faults. In this possibility of

his tarrying to display my virtues there was some compensation for my sitting alone, with old Captain and young Colonel, both sleeping, and only my pipe for company. Of course, I should really be there with Tim, but Nanny Pulsifer and Mrs. Spiker had decreed otherwise. Who knows how great may be my reward for bringing them safely past the graveyard!

The third pipe snuffled out. I opened the door and listened. Tim's minutes are long, for the last light in the village is out now. I went to the gate and stood there till I caught the sound of foot-falls. Then I whistled softly. There was no reply, but in a moment Perry Thomas stepped into the light of our window.

"Good-evening," he said cheerfully. "It's rather chilly to be swinging on the gate."

"I was waiting for Tim," I answered.

Perry gave a little dry cackle. "Let's go in," he said. "It's too cold out here to discuss these great events."

I did not know what he meant, neither did I much care, for Perry always treated the most trivial affairs in the most elegant language he

knew. But now that he stood there with his back to the fire, warming his hands, he made himself more clear.

"Well, Mark," he said, "I congratulate you most heartily."

I divined his meaning. It did not seem odd that he had learned my secret, for I was lost in admiration of his having once weighed an event at its proper value. So I thanked him and returned to my chair and my pipe.

"Of course it hurts me a bit here," said he, laying his hand on his watch-pocket. "I had hopes at one time myself, but I fear I depended too much on music and elocution. Do you know I'm beginnin' to think that a man shouldn't depend so much on art with weemen. I notice them gets along best who doesn't keep their arms entirely occupied with gestures and workin' the fiddle."

Perry winked sagely at this and cackled. He rocked violently to and fro on his feet, from heel to toe and toe to heel.

"Yet it ain't a bit onreasonable," he went on. "The artist thinks he is amusin' others, when, as

a matter of fact, he is gettin' about ninety per cent. of the fun himself. We allus enjoys our own singin' best. I see that now. I thought it

"OF COURSE IT HURTS ME A BIT HERE."

up as I was comin' down the road and I concided that the next time I seen a likely lookin' Mrs. Perry Thomas, she could do the singin' and the fiddlin' and the elocution, and I'd set by and look on and say, 'Ain't it lovely!'"

"You bear your disappointments bravely," said I.

"Not at all," Perry responded. "I'm used to 'em. Why, I don't know what I'd do if I wasn't disappointed. Some day a girl will happen along who won't disappoint me, and then I'll be so set back, I allow I won't have courage to get outen the walley. Had I knowd yesterday how as all the courtin' I've done since the first of last June was to come tumblin' down on my head to-night like ceilin' plaster, not a wink of sleep would I 'a' had. Now I know it. Does I look like I was goin' to jump down the well? No, sir. 'Perry,' I says, 'you've had a nice time settin' a-dreamin' of her; you've sung love-songs to her as you followed the plough; you've pictured her at your side as you've strayed th'oo fields of daisies and looked at the moon. Now in the natural course of events she's goin' to marry another. When she's gettin' peekit like trying to keep the house goin' and at the same time prevent her seven little ones from steppin' into the cistern or fallin' down the hay-hole, you can make up another pretty pickter with one of

the nine hundred million other weemen on this globe as the central figger!'"

At the conclusion of this philosophic speech my visitor adjusted his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, brought himself to rest with a click of his heels and smiled his defiance.

"But I congratulate you truly, heartily," he added.

"Thank you, Perry," I answered. "In spite of your trifling way of regarding women, I hope that some day you may find another as good as Mary Warden."

"The same to you, Mark," said he.

"The same to me?" I cried, with a touch of resentment.

"Of course," he replied. "I says to myself to-night, 'I hope Mark is as fortunate,' I says, when I saw them two a——"

"What two?" I exclaimed, lifting myself half out of my chair in my eagerness.

"Why, Tim and her," Perry answered. "Ain't you heard it yet, Mark? Am I the first to know?"

"Tim and her," I cried. "Tim and Mary?"

"Yes," said Perry.

He saw now that he was imparting strange news to me. In my sudden agitation he divined that that news had struck hard home, and that I was not blessed with his own philosophic nature. The smile left his face. He stepped to me, as I sat there in the chair staring vacantly into the fire, and laid a hand on my shoulder.

"I thought of course you knowd it," he said gently. "I thought of course you knowd all about it, and when I seen them up there to-night, her a-holdin' to him so lovin', says I to myself, 'How pleased Mark will be—he thinks so much of Tim and Mary.' "

Tim's minute! I knew now why it was so long. I should have known it long ago. I feared to ask Perry what he had seen. I divined it. I had debated with myself too much the strangeness of Mary's promise, and often in the last few days there had come over me a vague fear that I was treading in the clouds. She had told me again and again that she cared for me more than for anyone else in the world. But that night when I had asked her if she loved me, she had turned

my collar up. I believed that when she spoke then it was what she thought the truth. She had pledged herself to me and I had not demanded more. I had been selfish enough to ask that she link herself to my narrow life, and she had looked at me clear in the eye. "You are strong, Mark, and good, and true," she had said, "and in all the world there is none I trust more. I'll love you, too. I promise."

On that promise I had built all my hopes and happiness, and it had failed me. It was not strange. I had been a fool, a silly dreamer, and now I had found it out. A soldier? Paugh! Away back somewhere in the past, I had gone mad at a bugle-call. A hero? For a day. For a day I had puffed myself up with pride at my deeds. And now those deeds were forgotten. I was a veteran, a crippled pensioner, an humble pedagogue, a petty farmer. This was the lot I had asked her to share. She had made her promise, and that promise made and broken was more than I deserved. From a heaven she had smiled down on me, and I had climbed to the clouds, reaching out for her. Then her face was turned

from me, and down I had come, clattering to common earth, cursing because I had hurt myself.

I turned to my pipe and lighted it again. Old Captain came and rested his head on my knee and looked up at me, as I stroked it slowly.

"Poor dog," I said. It was such a relief, and Perry misunderstood.

"Has he been hurt?" he asked sympathetically.

"Yes," I answered, still stroking the old hound's head. "Very badly. But he'll be all right in a few days—and we'll go on watching the mountains—and thinking—and chasing foxes —to the end—the end that comes to all poor dogs."

"It's curious how attached one gets to a dog," said Perry sagely, resuming his rocking from heel to toe and toe to heel.

"It is curious," I said, smoking calmly. I even forced a grim smile.

Now that I could smile, I was prepared to hear what Perry had to tell me, for after all I had been drawing conclusions from what might prove to be but inferences of his. But he had

been so positive that in my inmost heart I knew the import of all he had to say.

"Well, Perry," I said, "you did give me a surprise. I didn't know it, and, to tell the truth, was taken back a bit, for it hurt me here." I imitated his effective waistcoat-pocket gesture, which caused him much amusement. "I had hopes myself—you know that, and as I neither fiddled nor recited poetry your own conclusions may be wrong."

"But Tim didn't do nothin'," Perry cackled. "He just goes away and lets her pine. When he comes back she falls right into his arms and gazes up into his eyes, and—" Perry stopped rocking and looked into the fire. "You know, Mark," he said after a pause, "it must be nice not to be disappointed."

"It must be very nice," said I, smoking harder than ever.

"That's what I said to myself as I looked in the window and seen them."

"You looked in the window—you peeped!" I fairly shouted, making a hostile demonstration with a crutch.

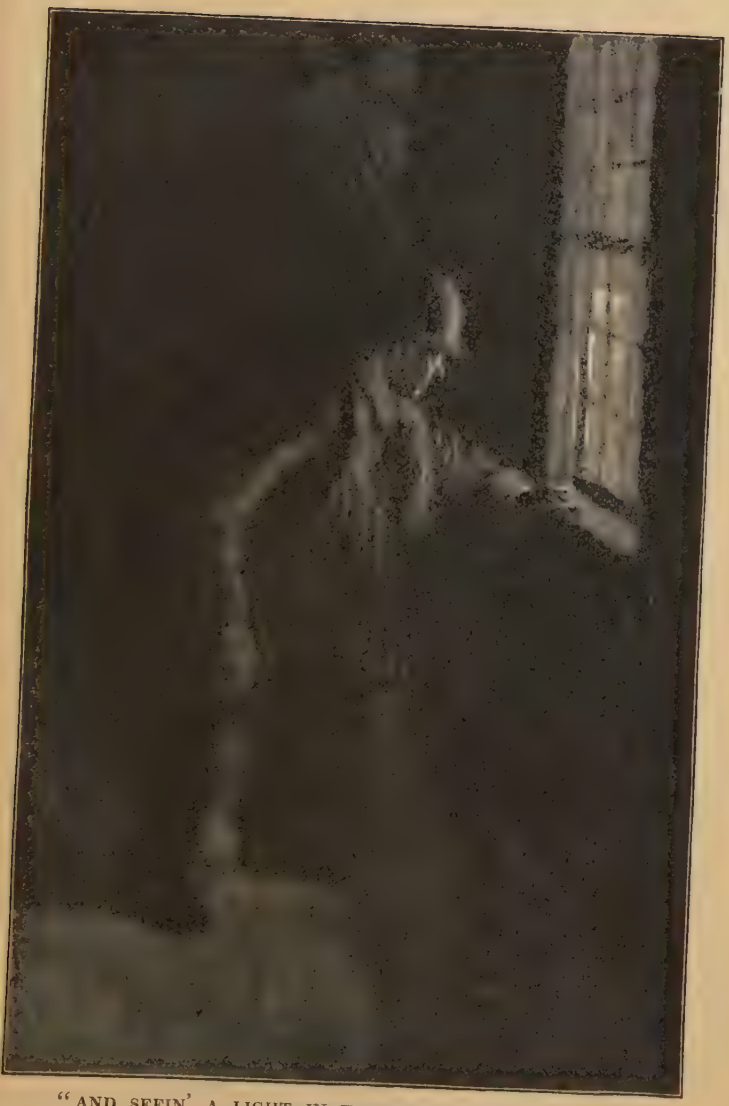
"Why, yes," said Perry, looking hurt that I should question his action in the least. "I didn't mean to. Comin' from over the ridge I passed Warden's and thought I'd stop in and warm up and see how Weston was. So I stepped light along the porch, not wantin' to disturb him, and seein' a light in the room, I looked in before I knocked. But I never knocked, for I says to myself, 'I'll hurry down and tell Mark; it'll please him.' "

"And you saw Tim and Mary," said I.

"I should say I did," said Perry, "till I slipped away. But says I to myself, 'It must be nice not to be disappointed.' "

"You said you saw Tim and Mary," said I, a trifle angrily.

"I should say I did," Perry answered, chuckling and rocking again on his feet. "The two of 'em, standin' there in the lamplight by the table, him a-lookin' down like he was dyin', her a-lookin' up like she was dyin' and holdin' on to him like he was all there was left for her in the world. It made me swaller, Mark, it made me swaller."



"AND SEEIN' A LIGHT IN THE ROOM, I LOOKED IN."

There was a lump in Perry's throat at that moment, and he stopped his rocking and turned to the fire, so his back was toward me.

"Of course you knocked," said I, after a silence.

"Of course I didn't," he snapped. "Do you suppose I was wanted then? 'No, sir,' I says, 'for them there is only two people in all the world—there's Tim and there's Mary.' "

Perry was putting on his overcoat, winding his long comforter about his neck and drawing on his mittens.

"To tell the truth," he said, with a forced laugh, "I don't feel as chipper as I usually do under such like circumstances. It seems to me you ain't so chipper as you might be, either, Mark."

"Good-night, Perry," I said, smoking very hard.

"Good-night," he answered. At the door he paused and gazed at me.

"Say, Mark," he said, "them two was just intended for one another—you know it—I see you know it. God picked 'em out for one another.

I know it. You know it, too. But it's hard not to be picked yourself—ain't it?"

. . . . . .

Tim's minute! God keep me from such another!

It was all so plain now. The fire was dying away. The hands of the clock were crawling off another hour, and still he did not come. But what did I care? All in the world that I loved I had lost—Mary and my brother—and Tim had taken both. He who had so much had come in his strength and robbed me, left me to sit alone night after night, with my pipe and my dogs and my crutches. Had he told me that night when I came back to the valley that he loved the girl in all truth, I should have stood aside and cheered him on in his struggle against her, but I had not measured the depth of his mind nor given him credit for cunning. Perry Thomas saw it. He had gone away from her and wounded her by his neglect. In the fabrication of the other girl, the beautiful Edith, whose charms so outshone all other women, he had hit at the heart of her vanity; and now he had come back so gayly and

easily to take from me what I might not have won in a lifetime. Losing her, I cared little that what he had done had been in ignorance that I loved her and that she was plighted to me. Losing her, I had no thought of blame for the girl, for when she told me that in all the world she cared for none so much as me, she meant it, for she believed that he had passed out of her life.

By the fireplace, so close that I could put my hand upon the arm, was the rocking-chair I had placed for her, and many a night had I sat there watching it and smiling, and picturing it as it was to be when she came. There would Mary be, sewing beneath the lamplight; there the fire burning, with old Captain and young Colonel, snuggling along the hearthstone; here I should be with my pipe and my book, unread, in my lap, for we should have many things to talk of, Mary and I. We should have Tim. As he played the great game, we should be watching his every move. And when he won, how she and I would smile over it and say "I told you so!" When he lost—Tim was never to lose, for Tim was invincible! Tim was a man of brain and

brawn. His arm was the strongest in the valley; in all our country there was no face so fine as his; in all the world few men so good and true.

Now he had come! The chair there was empty. So it would always be. But here I should always be with my pipe and my crutches, and the dogs snuggling by the fire.

Tim had come! The clock hands were crawling on and on. His minute had better end. I hurled my pipe into the smouldering coals; I tossed a crutch at little Colonel, and the dog ran howling from the room. Old Captain sat up on his haunches, his slantwise eyes wide open with wonder.

Aye, Captain, men are strange creatures. Their moods will change with every clock-tick. One moment your master sits smoking and watching the flames—the next he is tearing hatless from the house; and it is cold outside and the wind in the chimney is tumbling down the soot. When the wind sings like that in the chimney, it is sweeping full and sharp down the village street, and across the flats by the graveyard, whither he goes hobbling.

Little Colonel comes cautiously into the room, hugging the wall till he is back at the fireside. With his head between his fore-paws and one eye closed, he watches the tiny tongue of flame licking up the last coal. There are worse lives than a dog's.

XVI

TIM came whistling down the road. He whistled full and clear, and while he was still at the turn of the hill the wind brought me a bit of his rollicking tune as I huddled on the school-house steps, waiting. The world was going well with him. He had all that the wise count good; he was winning what the foolish count better. With head high and swinging arms he came on, the beat of his feet on the hard road keeping time to his gay whistling. Tim was winning in the game. While his brother was droning over the reader and the spelling-book with two-score leather-headed children, he was fighting his way upward in the world of commerce. While his brother was wringing a living from a few acres of niggardly soil and a little school, he was on the road to riches; while his brother was wrangling with the worthies of the

store over the momentous problems of the day, he was where those problems were being worked out and standing by the men who were solving them. All in this world worth having was Tim's, and now even what was his brother's he had taken. To him that hath! From him that hath not! He had all. I had nothing. Now as he came swinging on so carelessly, I knew that I had lost even him.

Never once had there come to my mind the thought of doing my brother any bodily harm. My emotions were too conflicting for me to know just why I had come at all into the night to meet him. Now it was against him that the violence of my anger would vent itself. Now it was against myself, and I cursed myself for an idle, dreaming fool. Then came over me, overwhelming me, a sense of my own utter loneliness, and against it Tim stood out so bold and clear-cut and strong, that I felt myself crying out to him not to desert me and let a woman take him from me. I thought of the old days when he and I had been all in all to each other, and I hated the woman who had come between us, who had lured

me from him, who had lured him from me. Then as against my misery, she stood out so bold and good, so wholly fair, that I cursed Tim for taking her from me. I wanted to see him in the full heat of my anger to tell him to his face how he had served me; to stand before him an accuser till he slunk from me and left me alone, as I would be alone from now to the end.

So I had quickened my pace, hobbling up the starlit road to the school-house. There I was driven by sheer exhaustion to the shelter of the doorway, and in the narrow refuge I huddled, waiting and listening. The keen wind found me out and seemed to take joy in rushing in on me in biting gusts and then whirling away over the flat. By and by it brought me the rollicking air my brother whistled, and then came the sound of foot-falls. In a moment he would be passing, and I arose, intending to hail him. It was easy enough when I heard only his whistling to picture myself confrating him in anger, but now that in the starlight I could see his dark form coming nearer and nearer; now that he had broken into a snatch of a song we had often sung

together, my courage failed me and I slunk farther into my retreat.

So Tim passed me. He went on toward the village, singing cheerfully for company's sake, and I stood alone, in the shadow of the school-house woods, listening. His song died away. I fancied I heard the beat of his stick on the bridge; then there was silence.

I turned. Through the pines on the eastward ridge the moon was climbing, and now the white road stretched away before me. It was the road to her house. The light that gleamed at the head of the hill was her light, and many a night in this same spot I had stopped to take a last look at it. It used to wink so softly to me as I waved a hand in good-night. Now it seemed to leer. The friendly beacon on the hill had become a wrecker's lantern. A battered hulk of a man, here I was, stranded by the school-house. As the ship on the beach pounds helplessly to and fro, now trying to drive itself farther into its prison, now struggling to break the chains that hold it, so tossed about my love and anger, I turned my face now toward the hill, now

toward the village. The same impulse that caused me to draw into the darkness of the doorway instead of facing Tim made it impossible for me to follow him home. Angry though I was, I wanted no quarrel, yet I feared to meet him lest my temper should burst its bounds. But I had a bitter wind to deal with, too, and if I could not go home, neither could I stand longer in the road, turning in my quandary from the beacon on the hill, where she was, to the light that gleamed in our window in the village, where he was.

The school-house gave me shelter.

I groped my way to my desk and there sank into my chair, leaned my head on my hands, and closed my eyes. I wanted to shut out all the world. Here in the friendly darkness, in the quiet of the night, I could think it all out. I could place myself on trial, and starting at the beginning, retracing my life step by step, I would find again the course my best self had laid down for me to follow. For the moment I had lost that clear way. Blinded by my seeming woes, I had been groping for it, and I had

searched in vain. But now the dizziness was going, and as I sat there in the darkness, my eyes closed to shut out even the blackness about me, the light came.

After a long while I looked up to see the moon high over the pines on the eastward ridge, and its yellow light poured into the room, casting dim shadows over the white walls, and bringing up before me row on row of spectre desks. The chair I sat in, the table on which I leaned were real enough. They were part of my to-day, but that dim-lighted room was the school-house of my boyhood. The fourth of those spectre desks measuring back from the stove, was where Tim and I sat day after day together, with heads bowed over open books and eyes aslant. That was not the same Tim who had passed me a while before, swaggering and singing in the joy of his conquest; that was not the same Tim who had stood before me that very afternoon in all the pomp of well-cut clothes, drawing on his whitened hands a pair of woman's gloves; that was not the same Tim who by his artful lies had won what had been denied my stupid, blundering de-

votion. My Tim was a sturdy little fellow whose booted legs scarce touched the floor, whose tousled black head hardly showed above the desk-top. His cheeks would turn crimson at the thought of woman's gloves on those brown hands. His tongue would cleave to his mouth in a woman's presence, let alone his lying to her. That was the real Tim—the rare Tim. To my eyes he was but a small boy; to my mind he was a mighty man. The first reader that presented such knotty problems to his intellectual side was but part of the impedimenta of his youth, and was no fair measure of his real size. That very day he had fought with me and for me; not because I was in the right, but because I was his brother.

A lean, cadaverous boy from along the mountain, a born enemy of the lads of the village, had dared me. I endured his insults until the time came when further forbearance would have been a disgrace, and then I closed with him. In the front of the little circle drawn about us, right outside there in the school-yard, Tim stood. As we pitched to and fro, the cadaverous boy and I,

Tim's shrill cry came to me, and time and again I caught sight of his white face and small clinched hands waving wildly. I believe I should have whipped the cadaverous boy. I had suffered his foul kicks and borne him to the ground; in a second I should have planted him fairly on his back, but his brother, like him a lank, wiry lad and singly more than my match, ran at me. My head swam beneath his blows, and I released my almost vanquished enemy to face the new foe with upraised fists. Then Tim came. A black head shot between me and my towering assailant. It caught him full in the middle; he doubled like a staple and with a cry of pain toppled into the snow. This gave me a brief respite to compel my fallen enemy to capitulate, and when I turned from him, his brother was still staggering about in drunken fashion, gasping and crying, "Foul!" Tim did not know what he meant, but was standing alert, with head lowered, ready to charge again at the first sign of renewed attack. He knew neither "fight foul" nor "fight fair"; he knew only a brother in trouble, and he had come to him in his best might.

That was the real Tim!

"I guess me and you can whip most anybody, Mark," he said, as he looked up at me from his silly spelling-book that day.

"As long as we stick together, Tim," I whispered in return.

He laughed. Of course we would always stand together.

That was long ago. Life is an everlasting waking up. We leave behind us an endless trail of dreams. The real life is but a waking moment. After all, it was the real Tim who had gone singing by as I crouched in the shadow of the school-house. The comrade of my school-days, who had fought for me with eyes closed and with the fury of a child, the companion of the hunt, racing with me over the ridges with Captain singing on before us, the brother at the fireside at night, poring over some rare novel—he was only a phantom. Between me and the real man there was no bond. He had grown above the valley; I was becoming more and more a part of it, like the lone pine on Gander Knob, or the piebald horse that drew the stage. His

clothes alone had made wider the breach between us. At first I had admired him. I was proud of my brother. But Solomon in all his glory was dressed in his best; from Dives to Lazarus is largely a matter of garments. Tim had made himself just a bit better than I, when he donned his well-fitting suit and pulled on his silly gloves. Beside him I was a coarse fellow, and to me he was not the old Tim.

This fine man had come back to the valley to take from me all that made life good. He had struck me over the heart and stunned me and then gone singing by. In Mary's eyes he was the better man of the two. To my eyes he was, and I hated him for it. He could go his way and I should go mine, for we must stand alone. In the morning he would go away and leave me with the Tim I loved, with the boy who sat with me at yonder desk, who raced with me over the ridges, who read with me at the fireside.

The shadows deepened in the school-room, for a curtain of clouds was sweeping across the moon. Peering through the window, over the flats, I saw a light gleaming steadily at the head

of the village street. It was my light burning in the window, and I knew that Tim was there, waiting for me. All the past rose up to tell me that he was still the comrade of my school-days, my companion of the hunt, my brother of the fireside.

My head sank to the table and my hands clasped my eyes to shut out the blackness. But the blackness came again.

XVII

TIP PULSIFER leaned on my gate. Crowning the post at his side was his travelling bandanna, into which he had securely clasped by one great knot all his portable possessions. It was very early in the morning, in that half-dark and half-dawn time, when the muffled crowing begins to sound from the village barns and the dogs crawl forth from their barrels and survey the deserted street and yawn. Tip was not usually abroad so early, but in his travelling bandanna and solemn face, as he leaned on his elbows and smoked and smoked, I saw his reason for getting out with the sun. He was taking flight. The annual Pulsifer tragedy had occurred; the head of the house had tied together his few goods, and, vowing never to trouble his wife again, had set his face toward the mountain. But on my part I had every reason to believe that Tip would show surprise when I hobbled forth from the misty gloom.

Just a few minutes before I had awakened. I had lifted my head from my desk, half-dazed, and gazed around the school-room. I had rubbed my eyes to drive away the veils that hid my scholars from me. I had pounded the floor with a crutch and cried: "It's books." The silence answered me. I had not been napping in school, nor was I dreaming. The long, miserable night flashed back to me, and I stamped into the misty morning. Weary and dishevelled, I was crawling home, purposeless as ever, now vowing I would break with my brother, now quickening my steps that I might sooner wish him

TIP PULSIFER LEANED ON MY GATE.

all the joy a brother should. A few dogs greeted me and then Tip, calmly smoking as though it were my usual time to be about of a morning.

"You are going over the mountain, Tip?" said I.

"Yes," he answered, throwing open the gate. "This is the last Six Stars will see of me. I'm done. The missus was a-yammerin' and a-yammerin' all day yesterday. If it wasn't this, it was that she was yammerin' about. Says I, 'I'm done. I'm sorry,' says I, 'but I'm done.' At the first peek of day I starts over the mountain. This is as fur as I've got. You've kep' me waitin'."

"Me—I've kept you waiting?" I cried. "Do you think I'm going over the mountain, too?"

"No," said Tip, with a grim chuckle. "You ain't married. You've nothin' to run from, 'less you've been yammerin' at yourself; then the mountain won't do you no good. I didn't figure on your company, but Tim kep' me."

"Is Tim out at this hour?" I asked.

"At this hour?" Tip retorted. "You'll have

to get up earlier to catch him. He's gone—up and gone—he is."

I sat down very abruptly on the door-step.

"Tim gone?" I said.

"Gone—and he told me to wait and say good-by to you—to tell you he'd set late last night for you, till he fell asleep. He was sleepin' when I come, Mark. I peeped in the window and there he was, in that chair of yours, fast asleep. I rapped on the window and he woke up with a jump. He was off on the early train, he said, and had just time to cover the twelve mile with that three-legged livery horse that brought him out. He was awful put out at not findin' you. He thought you was in bed, but you wasn't, and I told him mebbe you'd gone up to the Warden's to lend a hand with Weston."

For the first time Tip eyed me inquisitively.

"I was up the road," I said evasively. "But tell me about Tim—did he leave no word?"

"He left me," said Tip, grinning. "He hadn't time to leave nothin' else. We figgered he'd just cover that twelve mile and make the train. That's why I'm here. As we was hitchin' he told

me particular to wait till you come; to tell you good-by; to tell you he'd watched all night—waited and waited till he fell asleep."

"And overslept in the morning so he had no time to drop me even a line—I understand," said I. "And now, Tip, having performed your duty, you are going over the mountain?"

"To Happy Walley," Tip cried, lifting the stick he always carried in these flights and pointing away toward Thunder Knob. "I'm done with Black Log. I'm goin' where there is peace and quiet."

"You lead the life of a hermit?" I suggested.

"A what?" Tip exclaimed.

"You live in a cave in the woods and eat roots and nuts and meditate," I explained.

"You think I'm a squirrel," snapped the fugitive. "No, sir, I live with my cousin John Shadrack's widder."

"Ah!" I cried. "It's plain now, Tip, you deceiver. So there's the attraction."

"The attraction?" Tip's brow was furrowed.

"Mrs. John Shadrack," I said.

The fugitive broke into a loud guffaw. He

leaned over the gate and let his pipe fall on the other side and beat the post violently with his hands.

"I allow you've never seen John Shadrack's widder," said he.

"I'd like to, Tip. Will you take me with you to Happy Valley?"

The smile left Tip's face, and he gazed at me, open-mouthed with astonishment.

"You would go over the mountain?" he said, drawling every word.

Over the mountain there is peace! It is cold and gray there in the early morning, and the hills are bleak and black, but I remember days when from this same spot I've watched the deep, soft blue and green; I've sat here as the hills were glowing in the changing evening lights and our valley grew dark and cold. What a fair country that must be where the sun sets! And we stay here in our dim light, in our dull monotones, when, to the westward, there's a land all capped with clouds of red and gold. There is Tip's Valley of Peace. John Shadrack's widow may not be a celestial being, but that is my sun-

set country. In journeying to it, I shall leave myself behind; in the joy of the road, in the changing landscape and skyscape, in the swing of the buggy and the rattle of the wheels, I shall forget myself and Mary and Tim for a time, and when I come back it will be with wound unhealed, but the throbbing pain will have passed, and I can face them with eyes clear and speech unfaltering.

"I'll go with you to Happy Valley, Tip," I said, rising and turning to the door. "You hitch the gray colt in the buggy and——"

"We are goin' to ride," cried Tip. He had always made his flights afoot before that, and the prospect of an easy journey caused him to smile.

"Do you think I'll walk?" I growled. "Get the gray colt and I'll give you a lift over the mountain, but I'll bring you back on Monday, too." Tip shook his head sullenly at this threat. "While you hitch, I'll drop a line to Perry Thomas to take the school. Now hurry."

Tip shuffled away to the barn, and I went into the house, and, after making a hasty breakfast

and getting together a few clothes, sat down at the table, where Tim had rested his drowsy head all night. I wrote two notes. One was to Perry and was very brief. The other was brief, but it was to Mary. When I took up the pen it was to tell her all I knew and felt. When at last I sealed the envelope it was on a single sheet of paper, bearing a few formal words, while the scuttle by the fireplace held all my fine sentiments in the torn slips of paper I had tossed there. I told Mary that I knew that she did not care for me and had found herself out. If it was her wish, we would begin again where we were that night when I saw her first, and I would guide myself into the future all alone, half happy anyway in the knowledge that it was best for her and best for Tim. Was I wrong, a single word would bring me back. I was to be away for three days, and when I returned I should look by the door-sill for her answer. If none was there, it was all I had a right to expect. If one was there—I quit writing then—it seemed so hopeless.

. . . . . .

Tip and I crossed Thunder Knob at noon. As we turned the crest of the hill and began the descent into the wooded gut, my companion looked back and waved his hand.

"Good-by to Black Log," he cried. "It's the last I'll ever see of you."

He turned to me and tried to smile, but a deep-set frown took possession of his face, and he hung his head in silence, watching the wheels as we jolted on and on.

We wound down the steep way into the gut, following a road that at times seemed to disappear altogether, and leave us to break our way through the underbrush. Then it reappeared in a broken corduroy that bridged a bog for a mile, and lifted itself plainly into view again with a stony back where we began to climb the second mountain. The sun was ahead of us when we reached the crest of that long hill. Behind us, Thunder Knob lifted its rocky head, hiding from us the valley of our troubles. Before us, miles away, all capped with clouds of gold and red was the sunset country, but still beyond the mountains. The gray colt halted to catch his

breath, and with the whip I pointed to the west, glowing with the warm evening fires.

"Yonder's Happy Valley, Tip," I said, "miles away still. It will take us another day to reach it."

"It will take you forever to reach it," was the half-growled retort. "I ain't chasin' sunsets. Here's Happy Walley—my Happy Walley, right below us, and the smoke you see curlin' up th'oo the trees is from the John Shadrack clearin'."

A great wall, hardly a mile away, as the crow flies, the third mountain rose, bare and forbidding. Below us, a narrow strip of evergreen wound away to the south as far as our eyes could reach, and at wide intervals thin columns of smoke sifting through the trees marked the abodes of the dwellers of Tip's Elysium. Peace must be there, if peace dwells in a land where all that breaks the stillness seems the drifting of the smoke through the pine boughs. The mountain's shadow was over it and deepening fast, warning us to hurry before the road was lost in blackness. But away off there in the west, where a half score of peaks lifted their summits above

the nearer ranges, all purple and gold and red, a heap of cloud coals glowed warm and beautiful over the sunset land. My heart yearned for that land, but I had to turn from the contemplation of its distant joys to the cold, gloomy reality below me.

The whip fell sharply across the gray colt's back, and he jumped ahead. Down the steep slope, over rocks and ruts we clattered, the buggy swinging to and fro, and Tip holding fast with both hands, muttering warnings. The gray colt broke into a run. All my strength failed to check him. Faster and faster we went, and now Tip was swearing. I prayed for a level stretch or a bit of a hill, for the wagon had run away too, and where the wagon and the horse join in a mad flight there must come a sudden ending to their career. The mountain-road offered me no hope. Steeper and steeper it was as we dashed on. Tip became very quiet. Once I glanced from the fleeing horse to him, and I saw that his face was white and set.

"Get out, Tip," I cried. "Jump back, over the seat."

"Not me," said he, grimly. "We come to Happy Walley together, me and you, and together we'll finish the trip."

He lent a hand on the reins, but it was useless,

THE HORSE WENT DOWN.

for the wagon and the horse were running away together, and there was nothing to do but to try to guide them.

"Pull closer to the bank at the bend ahead," Tip cried.

Almost before the warning passed his lips we had shot around the projecting rock, where the road had been cut from the mountain-side. We were near our journey's end then, for at the foot of the embankment that sheered down at our left we heard the swish of a mountain-stream. The horse went down. There was a cry from Tip—a sound of splintering wood—something seemed to strike me a brutal blow. Then I lay back, careless, fearless, and was rocked to sleep.

XVIII

SHE sat smoking.

Had I never heard of her before, had I opened my eyes as I did that day to see her sitting before me, I should have exclaimed, "It's John Shadrack's widder!"

So, with the crayon portrait, gilt-framed, that hung on the wall behind her, I should have cried, "And that is John Shadrack!"

This crayon "enlargement" presented John with very black skin and spotless white hair. His head was tilted back in a manner that made the great bushy beard seem to stick right out from the frame, and gave the impression that the old man was choking down a fit of uproarious laughter. I knew, of course, that he had been posed that way to better show his collar and cravat. Though Tip had described him to me as a rather gloomy, taciturn person, the impression gained in the long contemplation of his

"AND I'M HIS WIDDER."

picture as I lay helpless on the bed never changed. To me he was the ideal citizen of Happy Valley, and the acquaintance I formed then and there with his wife served only to endear him to me.

She sat smoking. I contemplated her a very long while and she gazed calmly back. A score of times I tried to speak, but something failed me, and when I attempted to wave my hand in greeting to her I could not lift it from the bed.

At last strength came.

"This is John Shadrack's house?" I said.

"Yes," said she, "and I'm his widder."

She came to my side and stood looking down at me very hard. I saw a woman in the indefinable seasons past fifty. In my vague mental condition, the impression of her came slowly. First it was as though I saw three cubes, one above the other, the largest in the middle. Then these took on clothing, blue calico with large polka dots, and the topmost one crowned itself with thin wisps of hair, parted in the middle and plastered down at the side. So, little by little, John Shadrack's widow grew on me, till I saw her a

square little old woman, with a wrinkled, brown face, a perpetual smile and a pipe that snuffled in a homely, comfortable way.

I smiled. You couldn't help smiling when Mrs. John Shadrack looked down at you.

"It's been such a treat to have you," she cried. "I've been enjoyin' every minute of your visit."

This was puzzling. How long Mrs. John Shadrack had been entertaining me, or I had been entertaining her, I had not the remotest idea. A very long while ago I had seen a spire of smoke curling through the trees in Happy Valley, and I had been told that it was from her hearth. Then we had gone plunging madly down the hill to it, Tip, the gray colt and I. We had turned a sharp bend, we had heard the swish of a mountain-stream. There my memory failed me. I had awakened to find myself helpless on a bed, strangely hard, but, oh, so restful! Then she had appeared, sitting there smoking.

"You are the first stranger as has been here since the tax collector last month," she said, beginning to clear away the mystery. "I love strangers."

"How long have I been here?" I asked.

"Since last Wednesday," she answered.

"And this is what?"

"The next Saturday. I've had you three days. You was a bit wrong here sometimes." She tapped her head solemnly. "But I powwowed."

"You powwowed me," I cried with all the spirit I could muster, for such treatment was not to my liking. I never had any faith in charms.

"Of course," she replied. "Does you think I'd let you die? Why, when me and Tip pulled you out of the creek you was a sight, you was, and you was wrong here." Again she tapped her head. "You needn't complain. Ain't you gittin' well agin? Didn't the powwow do it?"

Hardly, I thought. I must have recovered in spite of it. But the old woman spoke with pride of her skill, and if she had not saved me by her occult powers, she had at least helped to drag me from the creek. For that I was grateful, so I smiled to show my thanks.

"What did you powwow for?" I asked, after a long while.

She had seated herself on the edge of the bed and was contemplating me gravely.

"Everything," she answered. "I never had a case like yours. I never had a patient who was run away with, and kicked on the head, and drownded. So I says to Tip, I says, 'I'll do everything. I'll treat for asthmy, erysipelas and pneumony, rheumatism and snake-bite, for the yallers and——' "

"Hold on," I pleaded. "I haven't had all that."

"You mought have had any one of 'em," she said firmly. "You should 'a' seen yourself when we found you down there in the creek. Can't you feel that bandage?" She lifted my hand to my head gently. I seemed to have a great turban crowning me. "That's where you was kicked," she went on. "You otter 'a' seen that spot. I used my Modern Miracle Salve there. It's worked wonderful, it has. I was sorry you had no bones broken so I could 'a' tried it for them, too."

"I'm satisfied with what I have," said I quietly. "It was pretty lucky I got off as well as I did

after a runaway, and the creek and the kick." Then, to myself, I added, "And the powwowing and the salve."

I tried to lift my head, but could not. At first I thought it was the turban, but a sharp pain told me that there was a spot there that might be well worth seeing. For a long time I lay with my eyes closed, trying not to care, and when I opened them again, John Shadrack's widow was still on the edge of the bed, smoking.

"Feel better now?" she asked calmly.

"Yes," I answered. "The ache has gone some."

"I was powwowin' agin!" she said. "Couldn't you hear me saying Dutch words? Them was the charm."

"I guess I was sleeping," I returned a bit irritably.

How the store would have smiled could it have seen me there on the bed, in that bare little room in John Shadrack's widow's clutches! Many a night, around the stove, Isaac Bolum, and Henry Holmes and I had had it tooth and nail over the power of the powwow. In the store there was not always an outspoken belief in the efficacy of

the charm, but there was an undercurrent of sentiment in favor of the supernatural. Against this I had fought. Perhaps it was merely for the joy of the argument that so often I had turned a fire of ridicule on the dearest traditions of the valley. Time and again, when some credulous one had lifted his voice in honest support of a silly superstition, I had jeered him into a grumbled, shamefaced disavowal. Once I sat in the graveyard at midnight, in the full of the moon, just to convince Ira Spoonholler that his grandfather was keeping close to his proper plot. And here I was, prone and helpless, being pow-wowed not for one ailment, but for all the diseases known in Happy Valley. How I blessed Tip! When we started he should have told me of the powers of our hostess. I would rather have undergone a hundred runaways than one week with that old woman muttering her Dutch over my senseless form. But I liked the good soul. Her intentions were so excellent. She was so cheery. Even now she was offering me a piece of gingerbread.

I ate it ravenously.

Then I asked, "Where is Tip?"

"He's gone down the walley to my brother-in-law, Harmon Shadrack's. He's tryin' to borry a me-yule."

"A what?"

"A me-yule. The colt was dead beside you in the creek. Him and me fixed up the buggy agin, and he's gone to borry Harmon's me-yule so as you uns can git back to Black Log."

"Tip's left Black Log forever," I said firmly.

Then John Shadrack's widow laughed. She laughed so hard that she blew the ashes out of her pipe, and they showered down over my face, and made me wink and sputter.

"There—there," she said solicitously, dusting them away with her hand. "But it tickled me so to hear you say Tip wasn't goin' back. Why, he's been most crazy since you come. He's afraid his wife'll marry agin before he gits home. I've been tellin' him how nice it was to have you both, and that jest makes him roar. He's never been away so long before."

"He thinks maybe Nanny will give him up this time?"

"Exact."

The old woman smoked in silence a long while. Then she said suddenly, "She must be a lovely woman."

"Who?" I asked.

"Tip's wife."

"Who told you?" I demanded.

"Tip."

This was strange in a fugitive husband, one who had fled across the mountains to escape a perpetual yammering.

"Tip!" I said.

"Yes, Tip," she answered. "Him and me was settin' there in the kitchen last night, and you was sleepin' away in here, and he told me all about Black Log. It must be a lovely place—Black Log—so different from Happy Walley. There's no folks here, that's the trouble. There's Harmonses a mile down the walley, and below him there's the Spinks a mile, and up the walley across the run there's my brother, Joe Smith, and his family—but we don't often have strangers here. The tax collector, he was up last month, and then you come. You have been a

treat. I ain't enjoyed anything so much for a long time. There's nothin' like company."

"Even when it can't talk?" I said.

"But I could powwow," she answered cheerily. "Between fixin' up the buggy, and cookin' and makin' you and Tip comfortable and powwowin' you, I ain't had a minute's time to think—it's lovely."

"What has Tip been doing all this while?"

"Talkin' about his wife. She *must be* nice. Did you ever hear her sing?"

"I should say I had," I answered.

The whining strains of "Jordan's Strand" came wandering out of the past, out of the kitchen, joining with the sizzle of the cooking and the clatter of the pans.

"I should say I had," I said again.

"She must be a splendid singer," John Shadrack's widow exclaimed with much enthusiasm. "Tip says she has one of the best tenor voices they is. He says sometimes he can hear her clean from his clearin' down to your barn."

"Farther," said I. "All the way to the schoolhouse."

"Indeed! Now that's nice. I allow she must be very handsome."

"Handsome?" said I, a bit incredulous.

"Why, Tip says she's the best-lookin' woman in the walley, and that she's a terrible tasty dresser."

"Terrible," I muttered.

"Indeed! Now that's nice. And is she spare or fleshy?"

"Medium," I said. "Just right."

"That's nice. But what'll she run to? It makes a heap of difference to a woman what she runs to. Now I naterally take on."

"I should say Nanny Pulsifer would naturally lose weight," I answered.

"That's nice. It's so much better to run to that—it's easier gittin' around. Tip says she has a be-yutiful figger. There's nothin' like figger. If there's anythin' I hate to see it's a first-class gingham fittin' a woman like it was hung there to air. But about Tip's wife agin—she must have a lovely disposition?"

"Splendid," I said.

"That's what Tip says. He told me that oncet

in a while when he was kind of low-down she'd git het-up and spited like, but ordinarily, he says, she's jest a-singin' and a-singin' and makin' him comf'table and helpin' the children. And them children! I'm jest longin' to see 'em. They must be lovely."

"From what Tip says," I interjected.

"From what Tip says," she went on. "He was tellin' me about Earl and Alice Eliza, and Pearl and Cevery and the rest of 'em. He says it's jest a pickter to see 'em all in bed together—a perfect pickter."

"A perfect picture," said I sleepily.

"Tip must have a lovely home. Why, he tells me they have a sewin'-machine."

"Lovely," said I. "And a spring-bed."

"And a double-heater stove," said she.

"And an accordion," said I.

"And a washin'-machine," said she.

"And two hogs."

"And he tells me he's going to git her a melodium."

"Indeed," said I. "Why, I thought he was never going back."

"To sech a lovely home?" The old woman held up her hands. "He's goin' jest as soon as he gets that me-yule and you're able." She laid her hand on my forehead. "There," she cried, "it's painin' you again, poor thing—that terrible spot."

It was hurting, despite the Modern Miracle, and I closed my eyes to bear it better. Over me, away off, as if from the heavens, I heard a sonorous rumble of mystery words. I felt a hand softly stroking my brow. But I didn't care. It was only Dutch, a foolish charm, a heritage of barbarity and ignorance, but I was too weary to protest. It entertained John Shadrack's widow, and I was going to sleep.

Tip was waiting for me to awake.

"I've got the mule," he said, when I opened my eyes, "and I thought you was never goin' to quit sleepin'; I thought the widder was joshin' me when she said you was all right; I thought mebbe she had drumpt it, she sees so much in dreams."

"What day is this?" I asked.

"Sunday," Tip answered. "I 'low we'll start

at daybreak to-morrow, and by sundown we'll be in Six Stars."

"In Six Stars!" said I. "I thought you'd left Six Stars forever."

"That ain't here nor there," he snapped. "I've got to git you back."

"Then you won't go to-morrow," said I. "Look here—I can just lift my hands to my head—that's all. It'll take a whole week's powwowing to get me to sit up even."

"What did I tell you, Tip?" cried John Shadrack's widow. She handed me a piece of gingerbread just to chew on till she got some breakfast for me, and while I munched it, Tip and I argued it out.

"Nanny'll think I've left her," Tip said.

"You did, Tip," said I. "You ran away forever."

"She'll be gittin' married agin," pleaded Tip.

"Serves you right," said I. Then, to myself, "Not unless the other man's an utter stranger."

"She hasn't enough wood chopped to last a week," said Tip.

"She chopped the last wood-pile herself," said I.

"There's Cevery," pleaded Tip. "Cevery never done me no harm, and who'll dandle him?"

"The same good soul that dandled him the day you rode over the mountain," I answered.

"But it's a good half mile from our house to the spring," Tip said, "and who'll carry the water?"

"Earl and Pearl and Alice Eliza," I replied. "They've always done it; why worry now?"

"Well, I don't care nohow," Tip cried, stamping the floor. "I want to go back to Black Log."

"So do I, Tip," I said; "but—there's that bad spot on my head again."

"Now see what you've done with your argyin', Tip Pulsifer," cried the old woman, running to me. "Poor thing—ain't the Miracle workin'?"

"I guess it is, but that's an awful bad spot—that's right, Widow, powwow it."

. . . . . .

For ten long days more Mrs. Tip Pulsifer chopped her own wood, Cevery went undandled, and Earl and Pearl and Alice Eliza carried the

water that half mile from the spring. For nine long days more John Shadrack's widow entertained the two strangers who had sought a refuge in Happy Valley, and found it. Rare pleasure did John Shadrack's widow have from our visit. There seemed no way she could repay us. It did her old heart good to have someone to whom she could recount the manifold virtues of her John—and a wonderful man John was, I judge. Had I not come, she might have lost the Heaven-given gift of powwowing, for there is no sickness in Happy Valley—the people die without it. It was a pleasure to have Mark settin' around the kitchen; it was elevatin' to hear Tip tell of his home and his wife and children; and as for cooking, it was no pleasure to cook for just one.

"You must come agin," she cried, on the morning of that ninth day, as she stood in the doorway of her little log-house and waved her apron at us. "It's been a treat to have you."

So we went away, Tip and I, with Harmon Shadrack's mule and the battered buggy. Our backs were turned to the Sunset Land. Our faces were toward the East and the red glow of

the early morning. When we saw Thunder Knob again, Happy Valley was far below us, and only the thin spire of smoke drifting through the pines marked the Shadrack clearing. I kissed my hand in farewell salute to it. Perhaps John's widow saw me—she sees so much in her dreams.

"There's no place like Black Log," said Tip, as we turned the crest of Thunder Knob. "Mind how pretty it is—mind the shadders on the ridge yon—and them white barns. Mind the big creek—there by the kivered bridge—ain't it gleamin' cheerful? There's no place like our walley."

XIX

IT was dark when I reached home. Opening the door, I groped my way across the room till I found the lamp and lighted it. Then I sat down a minute to think. Two weeks is a very short time, but when you have been over the mountains and back, when you have hovered for days close to the banks of the Styx, when you have huddled for days close to the Shadrack stove, listening to the widow's stories of her John and Tip's praise of his wife, then a fortnight seems an age. But everything was as I had left it. Even the pen leaned against the inkwell and the scraps of paper littered the floor where I had tossed them that morning, when Tip and I started over the mountain. Those scraps were part of the letter I did not send to Mary. They flashed to me the thought of the one I had sent, and of the answer I never expected. It was foolish to look, but I had told her to slip her note

under the door, if she did send it, and I was taking no chances. Seizing the lamp, I hobbled to the kitchen, and laughing to myself at the whole absurd proceeding, leaned over and swept the floor with the light.

Right on the sill it lay, a small white envelope!

I did not waste time hobbling back to my chair and the table. I sat right down on the floor with the lamp at my side, and tore open the note and read it.

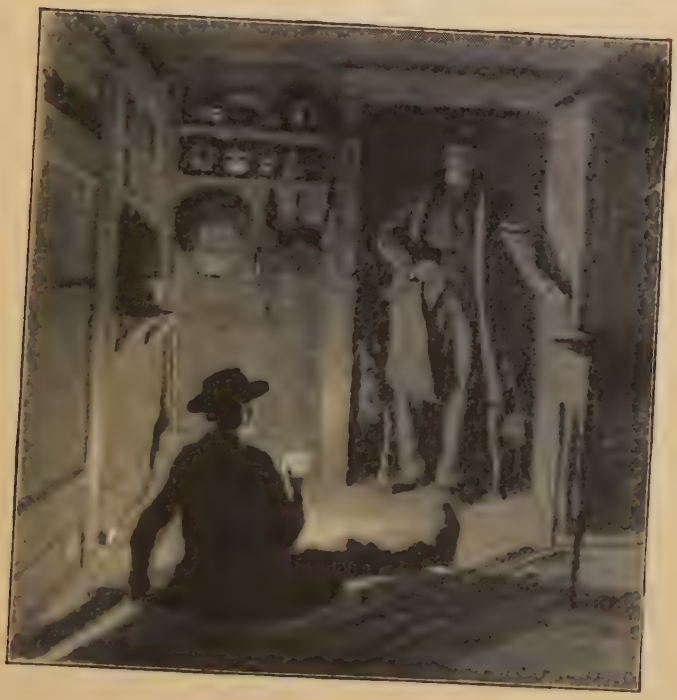
"Dear Mark. Please come to me."

That was all she said. It was enough. It was all I wanted in the world.

Once I had been disappointed, but now there was no mistaking it. Upside down, backward and forward I read it, right side up and criss-cross, rubbing my eyes a half a hundred times, but there was her appeal—no question of it. After all, all was well. And when Mary calls I must go, even if I have crossed two mountains and am supperless. All the bitterness had gone. All those days of brooding were forgotten, for I could go again up the road, my white road, to the hill, and the light there would burn for me.

Then Tim came!

I was still sitting on the floor when he came,



THEN TIM CAME.

reading the note over and over, with the lamp beside me.

With Captain and Colonel at his heels he burst in upon me.

"Well, Mark, you scoundrel," he cried, laughing, as he caught me by the arm and lifted me up. "Where have you been?"

"Travelling," I answered grimly. "And you —what are you doing here?"

"I came to find you," he said. "Do you suppose you can disappear off the face of the earth for two weeks and that I will not be worried? Why, I came from New York to hunt you up—just got here this afternoon and was over at Bolum's when we saw the light. Now give an account of yourself."

"It isn't necessary," said I, smiling complacently. I put the lamp on the table and picked up my hat. "I'll be back in a while," I said. "I'm going up to see Mary."

"To see Mary?" Tim cried.

"Yes, to see Mary," I answered.

Then, with a little flourish of triumph, I handed him her note.

Tim read it. His face became very grave, and he looked from it to me, and then turned and, with an elbow resting on the mantel, stood gazing down into the empty fireplace.

"Well?" I exclaimed, angered by his mood.

"This is two weeks old, Mark," he said, handing me the paper.

"What of it?" I cried querulously, putting on my hat and moving to the door.

My hand was on the knob turning it, when Tim said, "Mary has left the valley."

It did not bother me much when he said that. I was getting so used to being knocked about that a blow or two more made little difference. The knob was not turned though. It shot back with a click, and I leaned against the door, staring at my brother.

"And when did she go?" I asked. "And where —back to Kansas?"

"To New York," Tim answered, "and with Weston—she has married Weston."

I was glad the door was there, for that trip over the mountain, with the creek, and the pow-wowing and all that, had left me still a little wobbly. Tim's announcement was not adding to my spirit. Long I gazed at his quiet face; and I knew well enough that he was speaking the truth. And, perhaps, after all, the truth was

best. It was all over, anyway, and we were just where we started before she came to the valley. I was just where I was before I found that note lying on the door-sill. I had been foolish, sitting there on the floor reading that message of hers that she had belied. But that was only for a minute, and I would never be foolish again. Trust me for that.

"She has married Weston," I said. "Well, the little flirt!"

Tim got down on the hearth and began piling paper and kindling and logs in the fireplace. He started the blaze, and when it was going cheerily he looked up to find me in my old chair by the table, with Captain beside me, his head on my knee as I stroked it.

"The little flirt!" I said again, bound that he should hear me.

He heard. He took his old chair, and resting his elbows on the table, resting his chin in his hands, a favorite attitude of his, he sat there eying me quietly.

"The little what, Mark?" he said at last.

"Flirt," I snapped.

It was simply a braggart's way. I knew it. Tim knew it, too. He seemed to look right through me. I was angry with him, I was jealous of him, because she had cared for him. I knew she had. I knew why she had. Tim and I were far apart. But he had made the breach. All the wrong wrought was his, and yet he sat there calmly eying me, as though he were a righteous judge and I the culprit.

"Why did you say flirt?" he asked quietly.

"She promised to marry me," I said.

"Yes."

"She loved you, Tim."

"Yes—and how did you know it?"

"Perry Thomas saw you that night when you went to stay a minute."

The color left Tim's face and he leaned back in his chair, away from the light into the shadow, and whistled softly.

"You knew it, then," he said, after a long while. "I didn't intend you should, Mark. I didn't intend you ever should."

"Naturally," said I in an icy tone.

"Naturally," said he. His face came into the

light again, and he leaned there on the table, watching me as earnestly as ever.

"Naturally," he said again. "I was going away, Mark, never to bother you nor her. Did I know then that you loved her? Had you ever told me? Was I to blame for that moment when I knew I loved the girl and that she loved me?"

"No. I never told you—that's true," I said.

"And yet I knew you cared for her, Mark. I could see that. I saw it all those nights when you would leave me to go plodding up the hill. That's why I went away."

"Why did you go away?" I cried. "You went to see the world and make money——"

"I went because I loved the girl and you did, too," said Tim. And looking into those quiet eyes, I knew that he spoke the truth and I had been blind all this time. "Weston knew it," he went on. "He saw it from the first. That's why he helped me."

"You are not at all an egotist," I sneered, trying to bear up against him.

"Entirely so," he said calmly. "I even thought

that I might win, Mark. But then I had so much and you so little chance, I went away to forget. Weston knew that. He knew, too, that there was no Edith Parker."

"And what has Edith Parker to do with all this?" I asked more gently, for he was breaking down my barriers.

"She might have done much for you had I not come back when Weston was shot. Couldn't you see, Mark, how angry Mary was with me for forgetting her? But Weston knew it. And that night—that minute—I only wanted to explain to Mary, and she saw it all, Mark, and I saw it all—and we forgot. Then she told me of you."

"She told you rather late," said I

"But she would have kept her promise. Couldn't you forgive her, Mark, for that one moment of forgetting? It was just one moment, and I left her then forever. We thought you'd never know."

"And thinking that, you came whistling down the road that night," I sneered. "You came whistling like a man mightily pleased with his

conquest—or, perhaps you sang so gayly from sheer joy in your own goodness. It seems to me at times like that a man would——"

"A man would whistle a bit for courage," Tim interrupted. "Couldn't he do that, Mark? Couldn't he go away with his head up and face set, or must he totter along and wail simply because he is doing a fair thing that any man would do?"

"Why, in Heaven's name, couldn't you keep her for yourself?" I cried, pounding the floor with my crutch.

Then, in my anger I arose and went stamping up and down the room, while Tim sat there staring at me blankly. At last I halted by the fireplace and stood there looking down at him very hard. I looked right into his heart and read it. He winced and turned his face from me. I was the righteous judge now and he the culprit.

"You left her, Tim," I said hotly. "You might have known the girl could never marry me after that minute. You might have known she was not the girl to deceive me—she would have told me; and then, Tim, do you think that I would have

kept her to her promise? Why didn't you come to me and tell me?"

"For your sake, Mark, I didn't," Tim answered, looking up.

"And for my sake you left the girl there—you turned your back on her and went away. Then in her perplexity she looked to me again, and I had gone. I didn't know. I went away for her sake, and when she sent for me I had forsaken her, too. That's a shabby way to treat a woman. Do you wonder she turned to Weston?"

"No," Tim said, "for Weston is a man of men, he is—and he cared for her—that's why he stayed in the valley."

"I knew that," said I, "for I saw it that day when he went away from me to the charcoal clearing."

"Then think of the lonely girl up there on the hill, Mark," Tim said. He joined me at the fireplace, and we stood side by side, as often we had stood in the old days, warming our hands, and watching the crackling flames. "Do you blame her? I had gone, vowing never to come back

again till she kept her promise to you; you had fled from her—she wrote, and no word came. And Weston is a wise man and a kind man, and when she turned to him she found comfort. Do you blame her?"

"No," I said, half hesitating.

"After all, it's better, too," Tim went on. "What could you have given her, Mark—or I, compared to what his wealth means to a woman like Mary?"

Wealth was not happiness. Money was not peace. Riches were a delusion. Now she had them. That was what Weston would give her, and I wished her joy. True, he loved the girl. True, he offered her just what I did, and with it he gave those fleeting joys that wealth brings. She should be happy—just as much so as if she had made herself a fellow-prisoner with me here in the little valley. For what had I to offer her? The love of a crippled veteran; the wealth of a petty farmer; the companionship of a crotchety pedagogue. What joy it would give her ambitious soul as the years went on to watch her husband develop; to see him growing in the

learning of the store; to have him ranking first among the worthies of the bench; to greet him as he hobbled home at night after a busy day at nothing! It was better as it was—aye—a thousand times.

But there was Tim. What a man Tim was, and how blind I had been and selfish! He stood before me tall and strong, watching me with his quiet eyes, and as I looked at him I thought of Weston, the lanky cynic, with his thin, homely face and loose-jointed, shambling walk. Then I wondered at it all. Then I said to myself, "Is it best?"

"What makes you so quiet, Mark?" asked Tim.

"I was wishing, Tim," I answered, laying a hand on each of his broad shoulders, "I was wishing you had kept her when you had her."

Tim laughed. It was his clear, honest laugh.

"It is best as it is," he said. "It's best for her and best for us, for she'll be happy. But supposing one of us had won—would it have been the same—the same as it was before she came—the same as it is now?"

"No," I answered.

"No," he cried. "Now for supper—then our pipes—all of us together—you in your chair and I in mine—and Captain and Colonel—just as it used to be."

XX

TIM has gone back to the city after his first long vacation and here I am alone again. He wants me to be with him and live down there in a brick and mortar gulch where the sun rises from a maze of tall chimneys and sets on oil refineries. I said no. Some day I may, but that day is a long way off. In the fall I am to go for a week and we are to have a fine time, Tim and I, but Captain and Colonel will have to be content to hear about it when I get back. Surely it will give us much to talk of in the winter nights, when we three sit by the fire again—Captain and Colonel and I.

Tim says it is lonely for me here. Lonely? Pshaw! I know the ways of the valley, and there is not a lonely spot in it from the bald top of Thunder Knob to the tall pine on the Gander's head. I would have Tim stay here with me, but he says no. He wants to win a marble mauso-

leum. I shall be content to lie beneath a tree. Tim is ambitious.

Just a few nights ago, we sat smoking in the evening, warming our hearts at the great hearth-

OLD CAPTAIN.

stone. Thunder Knob was all aglow, and the cloud coals were piled heaven-high above it, burning gold and red. Down in the meadow Captain and Colonel raced from shock to shock on the trail of a rabbit, and a flock of sheep, barnward bound, came bleating along the road.

Tim began to suppose. He was supposing me a great lawyer and himself a great merchant and all that. I lost all patience with him.

WHEN WE THREE SIT BY THE FIRE

Suppose it all, Tim, I said. Suppose that you, the great tea-king, and I, the statesman, sat here smoking. Would the cloud coals over there on Thunder Knob blaze up higher in our honor? And the quail, perched on the fence-stake, would she address herself to us or to Mr. Robert White down in the meadow? Would the night-hawk, circling in the clouds, strike one note to our glory? Could the bleating of the sheep swing in sweeter to the music of the valley as she is rocked to sleep?

THE END